

THE AMATEUR DIPLOMAT

HUGH S. EAYRS & T. B. COSTAIN

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Hugh S. Eayrs and Thomas B. Costain

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THE AMATEUR DIPLOMAT

A Novel

BY

HUGH S. EAYRS AND T. B. COSTAIN

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CHAPTER I

A CANADIAN IN SERAJEZ

On a sunny spring day in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and fifteen, a fiacre drove up to a big house in the Lodz, the winding, crescent-shaped street in Serajoz, the capital of Ironia, in which were to be found the Embassies and the residences of the wealthier class. There was nothing singular, apparently, in that particular fiacre driving up to that particular house. Fiacres in scores drove up there and drove away again day after day the year through and occasioned little remark. Yet if certain influential gentlemen in Ironia had known who it was that jumped out of the fiacre on that sunny spring day, and if these influential Ironians had had the gift of prophetic vision in superlative degree, they might have taken some action to prevent him from reaching the house of Baroness Draschol and her husband, Mr Percival Varden. And then, perhaps, this story would never have been written, because Ironia might never have——But this is anticipating.

The fiacre stopped. Almost before all motion had ceased, a tall, alert-looking young man jumped out and, fishing out a handful of coins from his pocket, implored the driver to take what was his due. The driver knew him for an American or an Englishman, or anything but an Ironian, and, carefully abstracting from the outstretched palm the equivalent of twice the legitimate fare, drove away with a smile on his face and a blessing upon foreigners who had not the gift of tongues.

The young man stood on the sidewalk a moment. Then, with the quick step which characterises the man of action, he strode up the narrow path to the house and rang the bell. It was answered by a pompous individual, resplendent in a dull strawberry-coloured plush suit, who, with the combination of obsequiousness and dignity which can be found only in the lackey in the Balkans, ushered the caller into a reception-room and retired with his card.

The young man looked around him appreciatively. The splendid paintings which adorned the walls, the luxurious hangings, the rich, deep carpet, the handsome lounge on which he was sitting, all appeared to surprise him.

"Some change from that den of Varden's in Montreal," he murmured.

The curtains at the end of the room parted and a tall, well-groomed man of about thirty-five came quickly across the floor with outstretched hands.

"Don Fenton, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed, pumping his visitor's hands up and down with vigorous exuberance.

"Percy Varden, by all that's—er—profane!" said Fenton, with equal enthusiasm.

"Old Don Fenton!" repeated Varden, slapping the other on the back and beaming on him with real affection. "And in Serajoz, of all places!"

"A pretty good place to be, if I'm to judge by your surroundings," said Fenton. "You must be a deputy-sultan at least, Yarden, to live in such state."

"Ironia isn't a bad place, Don," said Varden, with sudden soberness. "Or at least it won't be if a certain event comes to pass. If that certain event doesn't happen, I intend to leave all this"—he made a broad gesture to indicate the luxurious room in which they stood—"and find a place for myself in the line with the boys in khaki. When your country's at war, it's hard to be an exile."

"I'm on my way back for that very same purpose," affirmed Fenton warmly. "When the war broke I was in Hungary, and I just escaped the detention camp by two hours. I got over into Russia after a series of adventures—dead broke. I had a letter of credit, of course, but it was gold that was needed. It took me a long time to establish my identity and convert my paper into gold currency. Then I came down through the Balkans on my way home and decided to drop off and see you here in Ironia. And here I am."

"But," said Varden, "what I want to know is how you ever got to Europe in the first place. What's the meaning of all this glib talk of letters of credit and gold currency? Last I heard of you, you were trying to convince the Canadian public that at last Eldorado had been discovered—in the form of subdivisions in Saskatchewan. And I judged from your letters that the public had developed an unwonted degree of scepticism."

"Then you haven't heard of my good fortune?"

"Why, no, I guess I haven't. What's happened?"

"An uncle of mine died and very unexpectedly left me several million dollars. I considered myself justified under the circumstances in following the bottom of the real estate market; that is, dropping out."

"Then you are *the* Fenton," declared Varden, shaking hands again. "I read something in a New York paper about a young Canadian coming into a big pile, but I never thought it would be you. Why, that possibility never entered my mind. Congratulations, old man, congratulations!"

"The congratulations should be mutual, Varden," said Fenton. "I remember when one Percival Varden was getting his fifteen per week, and wasn't worth that any more than I was my twelve per—according to that honest gentleman, that fair-minded director of budding journalists, George W. Jackson, city editor of the *News Despatch*—the unspeakable cur!"

"Then time hasn't cured you of your reverence for dear old Jackson—the ill-bred beast!" said Varden, with a laugh that ended in a growl.

"No, I'll never give up my grudge until I have a chance to assign Jackson to cover an August excursion to Hades. They would never let him come back."

"Still, they were happy days in Montreal, weren't they?" said Varden. "But I guess I ought to explain about my good fortune. I returned to England and met Baroness Draschol in London. We fell in love, and that wonderful woman overlooked my personal deficiencies, my poverty and my lack of position, and actually married me! My wife is connected with the royal family of Ironia and owns so much property I haven't found out about it all yet. And yet she married me, poor old hack scribbler that I was. Fenton, when you meet her you'll wonder too how it could ever have happened. I've been married three years and I'm still dazed at my wonderful good fortune."

"Three years married and still in the raving state!" jeered Fenton. "One week generally serves to translate a bridegroom from that condition. Varden, you must be the luckiest fellow in the world."

"I am," affirmed Varden emphatically. "But wait until you see Sonia. She'll be delighted to meet you. We've often talked about you. And by Jove, Don, you are looking well!"

Fenton was about thirty years of age—a handsome fellow in a healthy, outdoor sort of way. He stood over six feet, broad-shouldered and straight-limbed. Set him in a crowd in any country of dark-pigmented, short-statured men and he stood out by contrast like a Norse god. It is not likely that any woman would ever refuse him the tribute of a second glance. And yet Fenton was not in any sense a lady's

man. The firm mouth, the strong jaw and clear eye told of resolve, of determination, of self-reliance. He had a finely chiselled face, a frank, clean, open face. Fenton was a manly man. It was said of him that he stood four-square to every wind that blew.

"Married yet?" went on Varden.

"No," replied the other.

"Then you've no one with you? No ties, no one whose wishes or whims you must consider?"

"Free as the air of the Western prairies," returned Fenton. "Why?"

"Well, if you can stay over and if you have the same taste for excitement that you had in the old days, I can gratify it for you, that's all."

"Tell me what it is all about. And, by the way, what are your people in Ironia going to do? Going to join us in this war? I heard a lot of talk about it as I came through Russia. Ironia seems to have been pretty well featured in the newspapers lately."

Varden looked around, then drew his chair closer to Fenton's.

"That's just the excitement I spoke of, Don," he said. "Ironia is going to figure in the war; that part of it is certain. But on which side? There are two factions in the country, and at the present time we are fighting like wild cats to determine the policy of the country. Both sides are determined to win; and let me tell you, Don, they take their politics hard in this land. It's a fight to the bitter end in which lives are not counted of any great importance.

"I guess you know pretty well how matters stand in Ironia," he went on. "The people as a whole are heart and soul with the Allies. Austria holds Serania and Mulkovina, two provinces that used to be part of Ironia. What Alsace and Lorraine are to France, these two provinces are to Ironia. It is certain that if the Allies win Russia will seize both Serania and Mulkovina, and then Ironia's chance of bringing her sons and daughters in the lost provinces back into the fold will have been lost for ever. Russia offers us the two provinces as the price of throwing in our lot with the Allies. Ironians see that it is their only chance and they clamour for war on Austria."

"But," said Varden, speaking cautiously, "there is one obstacle. King Alexander of Ironia is dead against the Allies. His sympathies are all with the Teutonic alliance. And he is possibly, next to the Kaiser, the most absolute monarch in Europe to-day. The envoys of Germany and Austria are camping on his doorstep, urging him to join them. He would throw the weight of Ironian intervention into the scales against the Allies to-morrow if he were not afraid of the feeling of his subjects. Fearing to act according to the dictates of his own mind, he nevertheless refuses to obey the clearly expressed mandate of the people and strike a blow for the restoration of the lost provinces."

"Does the King stand alone?" asked Fenton.

"By no means," replied Varden. "There is a faction that stands by him, composed of a number of the nobles and the Austrian section of the country. The majority of the nobles, practically all of the business classes and the common people *en masse* favour an alliance with England, France and Russia. Needless to state, I am with the latter faction. I am, in fact, right in the thick of it—sort of a lieutenant to Prince Peter, the King's brother, who acts as leader of the popular cause, and who is, by the way, the strongest man in the country. It's a great fight, Don—intrigues, plots and counterplots, with secret societies on both sides, duels, assassinations and all the other properties necessary to a Balkan imbroglio. One never knows when a bullet may not come his way or a knife find lodgment between his shoulder-blades."

Varden had risen and was pacing up and down the room excitedly. He paused in front of his guest.

"Do you remember the thrill you get in a fight for a big news story?" he asked. "That's all child's play in comparison with this game."

Fenton stood up in turn and faced his friend.

"I intend to place myself at the disposal of my country," he said. "I've been wondering how I could serve best—by enlisting in England, or by staying right here and helping in the fight to bring Ironia into line with the allied cause. If you think I could be of any use, Varden, I would like to figure in the fight here. Every cent I've got, my own time, my life, if necessary, are at your disposal."

"Great!" cried Varden, wringing Fenton's hand for the third time. "Can you be of assistance, boy? I wish I had a hundred like you. And a little cash won't be amiss either. Count yourself in from now on. You've enlisted in the cause."

"Well, what's the next move?" asked Fenton, impatient for action and eager for a closer acquaintance with the thrilling experiences of Ironian intrigue.

"Have patience, you old fire-eater," admonished Varden with an amused smile. "There's a ball at the palace to-night. I'll get an invitation for you and probably I'll be able to introduce you to some of the leading characters in the drama. They'll all be there. All you'll

have to do this time will be to keep your eyes and ears open."

As Fenton walked down the steps and into the waiting fiacre, he smiled to himself. "Don Fenton, diplomat, is a new one," he said. "But one man in his time plays many parts. I guess it will be more exciting than reporting or selling real estate, anyway."

CHAPTER II

THE ROYAL BALL

The ball at the palace was a very brilliant affair. The rooms were hung with a thousand lights; the flowers, many of them strange to Fenton's western knowledge, and the decorations were on a munificent scale. Beautiful women and handsome men in vari-coloured uniforms moved here and there, intent upon enjoying themselves. Fenton was impressed and not a little surprised. The whole atmosphere was one of wealth and luxury, such wealth and such luxury as one does not expect to find in the kingdoms of the Balkans.

Fenton was paying a mental tribute to it all when Varden touched him on the arm and took him away to present him to King Alexander and his consort. Fenton had heard that the King was a charming man, and His Majesty's personality made the few words of welcome which he uttered well worth remembrance. Alexander was possibly the handsomest monarch in Europe. Dark, tall and soldierly he looked every inch a king. It came to Fenton as he stood there chatting, that here was a man who would have his own way.

The formalities of royal presentation over, Fenton was backing away when he caught a glimpse of an officer, apparently of high rank, approaching the King, with a young girl on his arm. Fenton looked at the girl—and forgot everything else. She was tall and graceful, with an air that could only be defined as regal. The oval face was surmounted with a crowning glory of hair, dark and lustrous. Her skin was like the petals of a wild rose. Her deep violet eyes, large and unwavering of gaze, were fringed with long lashes that imparted the only suggestion of coquetry to a face of surpassing witchery and charm. Fenton continued to stare in a literal haze of admiration.

He was aroused from his dream by the reappearance of Varden. The latter took him by the arm and propelled him forward until they stood in the presence of the divinity who had so completely set Fenton's wits wool-gathering. Fenton, awe-struck at this good fortune, felt like a humble mortal suddenly transported into the august company of the gods on Mount Olympus.

"Your highness," he heard Varden say to the girl, "may I present Mr Fenton, my friend from Canada? Fenton, this is her highness, the Princess Olga."

The Canadian bowed low over the princess's hand, surely the most dainty hand in all the world. He was presented in due form to her escort, the Grand Duke Miridoff, a heavy-set man with hawk-like features, long moustache and side-whiskers, which stood out aggressively with an unmistakable Teutonic suggestion. The grand duke typified the domineering efficiency of the military caste.

Fenton, murmuring a commonplace greeting, felt a strange antagonism for Miridoff. The latter's manner, while strictly courteous and even urbane, did not conceal the fact that Miridoff himself took no pleasure in the introduction.

In a few minutes Varden, with a happy tact, discovered an errand that took both himself and Miridoff away. Fenton allowed his glance to follow their retreating figures for a moment, and then, conscious of the scrutiny of his companion, turned back to the princess. She was studying him with frank interest and did not seem at all disposed to hide it.

"I must have a long talk with you, Mr Fenton," she said, speaking in excellent English. The conversation previously had been conducted in French, in which Fenton was well schooled. "You are so—so different from us. I have met but two Americans before, and they were of Austrian descent. You see, we are off the beaten track of tourists here in Ironia. Coming from your strange, big country across the ocean you seem almost like a visitor from Mars."

The princess smiled, and if her face was charming in repose it was ten times more so when it expressed animation. Fenton's diffidence left him. He began to talk of Canada, of the vastness of the country, of its customs and its freedom; particularly of its freedom. The princess listened with deepest interest.

"I should like to go to America—to Canada," said she. "It would be so splendid to be able to do what one wanted without bothering with customs and etiquette; to be able to go about without endless crowds of people staring at one."

"Canadians turn out to stare at princesses the same as they do here in Ironia," answered Fenton. "In fact, as their opportunities are fewer, they probably make more of them. And even if you were to travel incognito—I'm afraid my countrymen would let their admiration get the better of their politeness."

They were soon on most friendly terms, quite forgetful of the fact that she was a princess of the royal line. In fact, Fenton found it difficult to realise that his companion was anything but an unusually attractive partner at a dance; and she seemed quite as willing to let all other considerations recede into the background. A quarter of an hour of most delightful interest passed, though it seemed but a moment to Fenton, when a tall, elderly man in uniform brought their *tête-à-tête* to an end.

"Mr Fenton, this is my father," said the princess.

The Canadian, who had been observing everything, acknowledged the introduction with a correct imitation of the stiff formal bow that seemed an integral part of Ironian etiquette. The princess's father bore a striking resemblance to King Alexander. Could this be the Prince Peter to whom Varden had referred?

They talked for a few minutes, the prince also speaking English with fluency. Then someone came, a little understrapper in a most gorgeous uniform, and bore the princess away to dance.

"Lucky devil!" sighed the Canadian to himself.

The two men walked out to a balcony, and on the prince's first remark Fenton became assured of his identity.

"Mr Varden has spoken of you to me," said Prince Peter. "He intimates that it is your intention to remain for some time in Ironia and to lend your assistance to the cause that Mr Varden has himself espoused."

Fenton responded warmly, and for half an hour the two men talked war problems and Ironia's relation thereto. Prince Peter discussed the situation with a frankness which might have astonished the young Canadian had he not been aware that all Ironia was thoroughly conversant with most phases of the vexed problem. When the prince returned to the ball-room, he left Fenton with an unbounded enthusiasm for the new cause and a deep respect for Prince Peter himself. The latter was a born leader in every respect, particularly in his ability to win adherents.

Fenton lit a cigarette and started down a dark path leading to the extensive and intricately planned royal gardens. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to be able to think, to dream. And his thoughts and dreams at first ran exclusively along one groove. How beautiful the princess was! He began to reflect on the future—his future and hers. In a moment his thoughts took a gloomy turn. He would go back to Canada, which now for the first time seemed void of interest. She would marry a man of royal blood and rule in some such country as Ironia. He pictured her married for diplomatic reasons to a royal nonentity, condemned to a lifetime of endless etiquette, of senseless rigmarole. He reflected darkly on the benighted condition of the old world which made such things possible. Was there no way that an ambitious young millionaire from the new world could succeed in upsetting this almost inevitable arrangement, by scaling the walls of custom and tradition?

In keeping with his thoughts his pace had become savagely energetic. He now discovered that he had wandered well away from the palace into a maze of dark paths. He stopped and looked about him. And then suddenly he heard voices.

They proceeded from a thick clump of bushes close to his right. One voice was raised sufficiently high above the rest to carry its message to his ears. The owner of the voice was speaking in German, and Fenton knew enough of that language to catch what was being said. It interested him so acutely that he stepped through the bushes cautiously in the direction from which the sound came.

In a small clearing, part of which was thrown into relief by a ray of light from a nearby building, stood a group of men. One of them turned and the light fell direct on his face. With a start of surprise Fenton recognised the Grand Duke Miridoff.

"Are we all here?" asked Miridoff.

From where he stood behind the bushes, Fenton could watch the party without being seen himself. He noted that they were all in uniform or evening dress, having apparently left the ball-room to attend this stealthy rendezvous. It struck Fenton that the majority of the group were not Ironians. They gathered about Miridoff, who quite apparently was the leader.

"Members of the Society of Crossed Swords," Miridoff was saying, "we have heard news of such importance that we deemed it necessary to have word passed quietly to each of you to meet here.

"Events are taking an unfavourable turn," he went on. "The King is still loyal to our cause, but the strong feeling throughout the country is making an impression on him. Peter is pressing him strongly. I regret to have to state it, but I can clearly see the King is wavering."

There was a moment's silence, and then Miridoff began again in such low tones that Fenton could hardly catch the words.

"I received important news to-night from the front. The Russians are massing for an invasion of Mulkovina. It will be hard to hold them. Once they get possession of Mulkovina, without Ironia's assistance, no power on earth will wrest it from them." Miridoff's voice at this point sunk almost to a whisper. "If the people know that Russia is ready for the advance, nothing will prevent them from declaring for

the Allies while there is still time to gain the two provinces by so doing. Alexander's opposition will be swept away. There is only one course left. Ironia must be ranged on Germany's side before the news of the Russian mobilisation leaks out!"

This statement was followed by a babel of discussion in which most of the men took part, and the confused tangle of talk proved too difficult for Fenton's inadequate knowledge of the German tongue. He lost the thread of the discussion until the decisive tones of Miridoff again cut through the talk.

"There is but one course open. If Prince Peter is not there to prompt the King, to urge his arguments of policy, Alexander could be rushed into declaring war against Russia at once. That is what we must bring about. Peter must be removed!"

A general murmur followed Miridoff's statement, and out of it Fenton's amazed senses picked one word—"Assassination!"

"Well, who's to do it?" someone asked.

"It is to decide that point that we are here," answered Miridoff. "It is a regrettable necessity, but our cause demands it. Peter dead, the people will be like a flock of sheep without a shepherd. Is it necessary to get your consent to the step?"

The men assented as with one voice to what their leader had said.

"Our oath binds us to secrecy," said Miridoff. Drawing from his pocket some slips of paper, he deposited them in his hat. "Two are marked," he said. "Those who draw them will be called upon to perform the service. Are you agreed?"

Rooted to the spot with horror, Teuton watched the men draw in turn from the hat. After all had drawn, two of them stepped aside for consultation with Miridoff.

"The rest of you had better go," said the latter. "This place is none too safe. Remember, not a word. Perhaps by to-morrow morning we shall have news for you, news that will shake the world and cause a grey fear to creep into the faces of the cursed English!"

CHAPTER III

DARING PROPOSALS

For the first time now, Fenton became aware that the happy accident which brought him as eavesdropper to this extraordinary assignation had also placed him in a most dangerous position. On completing their consultation, the three men made straight in his direction. Fenton tried to shrink back farther into the rhododendrons, but even in the darkness they did not afford sufficient shelter for a man with the conspicuous white front of evening dress. He decided that his best chance of safety lay in flight.

Pulling the collar of his dress coat up around his neck, he started off cautiously. Unfortunately he stumbled and nearly fell headlong into a small shrub. Sharp exclamations from the rear warned him that he had betrayed his presence to the three conspirators. Throwing all other considerations to the winds, therefore, Fenton ran for dear life.

The men behind took up the pursuit with business-like grimness. Not a word was uttered, but in an instant he heard the steady pound of their feet and then the sharp discharge of a revolver. A bullet whizzed close past his ear, showing that the conspirators were not firing entirely at random. Several more shots followed in the next few minutes, and in each instance they were but an inch or two off their mark.

Fenton had been a sprinter in his college days, and the knowledge that three expert and determined marksmen are on one's trail is perhaps the greatest spur to velocity that could be imagined. Without paying any heed to his course, he plunged straight ahead, through shrubbery and garden plots, around fountains and over railings. His pursuers made up in desperation what they lacked in length of leg, and it took the young Canadian some time to gain a comfortable lead. At last he outdistanced them, however, and by pursuing a devious course landed, all unwittingly, at a side door of the palace. He pushed it open and, finding no one to stop him, made his way down a corridor toward the sound of the music.

Without pausing to catch his breath or plan any definite course, Fenton showed in the ball-room. Glances that drifted his way fixed themselves on him with astonishment, until finally the Canadian found that, much as he had desired to avoid notice, he had instead made himself the cynosure of all eyes. The reason was not hard to find. In his flight he had broken recklessly through brambles and thick shrubbery. The front of his once immaculate dress shirt was wilted and soiled; his face scratched, his hair rumpled. He looked as though he had been through a football scrimmage.

To find Varden was his first endeavour, but the latter unfortunately was nowhere in sight. So Fenton decided to seek Prince Peter in person, and convey to him direct the startling news he had stumbled upon. Threading his way blindly through the gay ranks in search of

the leader of the allied cause, he came in contact with the Grand Duke Miridoff. The two men halted and stood for a moment face to face, like belligerents. Their glances crossed like rapier blades. Miridoff coldly and without haste appraised the disorderliness of the young Canadian's attire.

"Mr Fenton has been strolling in the gardens?" he said.

Fenton was no diplomat. He was unversed in the art of exchanging polished phrases in the face of tense situations, of veiling threats, innuendoes, warnings, in the guise of polite rejoinders. He replied with the directness and vigour that are supposed to be characteristic of the Canadian character.

"Yes, I have been strolling in the gardens," he said, "and it's lucky I happened to be around just when I did!"

Miridoff, accustomed to the devious ways of diplomacy, was thrown off his guard by the sheer unexpectedness of so direct a rejoinder. He regained his poise in an instant, however, and treated Fenton to a cold glare.

"Perhaps Mr Fenton will find it unlucky for himself that he happened to be around just when he did," he said, passing on.

The remark set Fenton thinking. Undoubtedly the situation presented certain possibilities that had not occurred to him before. His presence at the meeting of the Society of Crossed Swords, known as it now was to the conspirators, would not serve as a deterrent to the carrying out of their foul purpose. Instead, it had given them a double aim; it would be advisable to get him out of the way before the plans laid for the death of Prince Peter were attempted. That much was quite clear even to one so completely unversed as himself in the ruthless way of Balkan politics. He was a marked man. It was equally clear to him that he was practically powerless in the matter. He could not go to the police or the military authorities and lay bare the whole thing to them. He would merely be laughed at for his pains. Who was he, an unknown foreigner, to lay such a serious charge against so illustrious a personage as the Grand Duke Miridoff? That course could have no effect other than to destroy his own usefulness to the cause he had espoused and perhaps to bring suspicion down on the prince and Varden. Fenton saw clearly that the only thing for him to do was to acquaint the prince of the plot against him and take the chance of any danger to himself which might arise in the meantime from the animosity of Miridoff's myrmidons.

He continued his search for Prince Peter with an almost feverish eagerness, recognising that every minute was precious now. Delay on his part might mean the death of the leader of the popular cause with all that such a calamity would entail. Miridoff's reasoning had been right; the prince out of the way, there would be little difficulty in persuading the King to swing Ironia into line against Russia.

But, to Fenton, the possibilities did not stop there. Prince Peter was father of the loveliest woman in the world! Ever since he had spent those golden minutes with the Princess Olga, thoughts of her had never been entirely out of his mind. Even as he had dashed headlong through the gardens, a picture of her as she had last appeared to him, in all her regal beauty and dainty girlishness floating off to the strains of "The Blue Danube" on the arm of a native officer, had remained with him. Could this great sorrow be permitted to come to her?

It was to the princess herself that he finally told the story of the plot. He could not locate her father, and, in sheer desperation, sought her out where she stood at the end of the long ball-room. His dishevelled appearance created comment in the group surrounding her, but Fenton, casting finesse to the winds, rode rough-shod over all considerations of court etiquette.

"Your highness," he said, "I must see you for a few minutes—alone. I assure you it is a matter of great urgency."

The princess, glancing at him intently, divined the earnestness behind his unusual request, and, with a murmured word, dismissed the partner to whom she had been engaged for the next dance. All eyes followed them as they crossed to a nearby alcove.

"Your highness," said Fenton earnestly, "I want to apologise, first for appearing in such a condition, and second for what must appear to you as gross ignorance of all that pertains to royal etiquette. I can plead in extenuation only the urgency of the case."

He told her in a few words of his blind excursion outside and its astonishing sequel. "I may have done wrong by telling you this," he concluded, "but I could find neither your father nor my friend, Varden, and I realised that every moment was precious."

For a moment there was silence. The eloquent dark eyes of the princess, which had been fixed on his face during the recital, were now filled with a troubled appeal.

"I cannot find words to thank you, Mr Fenton," she said, clasping her hands together. "Your news is disquieting, although I have feared for the safety of the prince, my father, ever since war broke out. Anything is possible in Ironia now—even that they should want the death of a prince who has never had a thought beyond the welfare of his country! He is the most unselfish man that ever lived, I think, Mr Fenton. One who has not known him can have no conception of the way in which he has given himself to the service of Ironia."

Fenton listened to her in a conflict of emotion. The compassion that he felt for this beautiful butterfly, enmeshed in the net of royal rank and placed within a circle where constant danger and intrigue were part of the price of position, was overshadowed by a still deeper feeling. Fenton had progressed thus far along the steep upward grade called life without any more lasting love episodes than an occasional

brief flirtation. He had always responded willingly enough to the appeal of a pretty face, but his first glimpse of the Princess Olga had stirred something within him that was deeper than admiration and more disturbing than any emotion he had ever experienced before. Her beauty left him in a condition where coherent speech was difficult and connected thought impossible.

This condition of mind was intensified by the position in which they were now placed. In the face of danger threatening, the fact of her position was lost. She was no longer a princess who might condescendingly stoop to a brief friendliness with a commoner from a strange country; she had become simply a girl, alarmed and distressed at the dangerous position of her father.

"I am so frightened!" she went on, averting her gaze to hide the look almost of terror that had come. "My father left the palace a few minutes ago. Could it be—can they carry out their purpose—before he can be warned of the danger?"

Fenton thought for a moment. "No," he answered confidently. "The prince must have left before I returned to the palace. In that case he got away before those precious rogues had any chance to carry out their plans. He must be reached at once and warned."

"But," the girl's voice came tensely, "I have no idea where he has gone. He has come and gone much of late, never telling anyone of his purpose or his movements. He may even return here before the night is over!"

"That wouldn't do," said Fenton, alarmed in turn. "I must find Varden. He'll be certain to know where the prince has gone."

He bowed and would at once have left her to renew his search for Varden had she not detained him with a gesture.

"Tell me, Mr Fenton, did you by any chance recognise the men in the garden?"

It was on the tip of Fenton's tongue to tell her all that he knew of the matter, but the recollection that when he had first seen her she had been in the company of Miridoff came in time to check him.

"It was very dark in the gardens and I have only been in the city a day," he replied. "There was but one I recognised in the group, and it would perhaps be wise not to name him."

"But I must know," persisted the princess. "We must understand from what source the blow might come. No consideration can outweigh that of my father's safety, and if I find him first I must know against whom to warn him."

"That is true," said Fenton, after a moment's consideration. Then with some hesitation, "I may be making a great blunder in telling you this. You see the one man I recognised—and he was undoubtedly the ring-leader—was with you when I had the honour of being presented to you to-night."

There was a moment's pause, during which the princess stared at him with eyes wide-open in their incredulity. Then her manner changed. She became wholly the princess again and there was unmistakable hauteur in her bearing and, when she spoke, in her voice.

"You have made a most extraordinary mistake, Mr Fenton," she said. "It is quite impossible that the one you have named could have been there."

"I was not mistaken," he declared. "I saw the Grand Duke Miridoff!"

"I do not doubt that you thought you recognised him," said the princess, her mood changing again to one almost of appeal, "but it was a fancied resemblance. The darkness deceived you. You have met him but once, and the mistake might easily occur."

"Your highness, there was no mistake," said Fenton earnestly. "I have no idea in what regard you hold this man. It may be that I am sacrificing all possibility of retaining a small measure of your favour and good opinion by my course. But there can be no doubt that the man who is plotting your father's assassination is the Grand Duke Miridoff! I saw him and heard him quite clearly. A few minutes ago I met him back there in the ball-room and he showed by what he said to me that he knew—what I know. It's war to the knife from now on!"

"Your highness," he went on, "whether or no you believe me when I tell you that the instigator of these men is the Grand Duke Miridoff, at least you must credit the fact that your father is in terrible danger. I saw and heard the men who have planned his death. They are fully in earnest. Don't refuse to believe what I say on that score. You know how important he is to his country at this time. He must be warned at once. It was the gravity of the situation that impelled me to tell you such alarming news. I sincerely regret not having been able to spare you this trying ordeal."

The distress of the princess was so palpable that Fenton did not stop for further words, but, bowing gravely, set off in anxious search of the elusive Varden. He found him at last in the supper-room. Quickly he told Varden of the plot and of his conversation with the princess.

Varden received the news gravely, but did not appear much surprised.

"We've been expecting some move from them," he said, "but I didn't think they would go to such lengths as this. It's lucky you stumbled in on their little gathering, Don. Now we know the cards they hold."

"But where's Prince Peter?"

"Safe," replied Varden. "He's out of their reach for the time being. I expect to see him inside of an hour and can put him on his guard. No need for worry, Don. We have the beggars checkmated whatever move they make."

Fenton smiled delightedly. The lust of conflict had seized him. He was finding this new game extremely interesting. Even the attitude of the Princess Olga could not dampen his ardent spirits; she would soon find that he had been right, and Fenton looked forward to another interview with her when a better understanding had been established.

"By the by, Percy, there's one angle of this affair that puzzles me," he said. "Who is Miridoff and what's his position with regard to the Princess Olga?"

"Miridoff," said Varden, "is the real leader of the Austro-German party. He is of Austrian descent; quite a large section of the people of Ironia are of Teutonic origin. He belongs to one of the branches of the royal line of the Hapsburgs and is a large landowner. Until recently he acted as director of foreign affairs for King Alexander, but public opinion forced him out of office at the outbreak of the war. Since then he's been directing the agitation for a Germanic alliance. He's a man who will stand a lot of watching. To put it in the vernacular, Miridoff is a bad actor."

"But where does he come in with the princess?" persisted the Canadian. "When I mentioned him as leader of that crowd of assassins she seemed upset."

"One would rather expect that," said Varden dryly. "You see the King has the say-so in regard to marrying off all members of the royal family, and it's pretty generally understood that he has picked out Miridoff for Olga."

"What!" In the one word Fenton expressed all the amazement, horror, rage and infinite regret that he felt at the announcement of so unbelievable a fact.

"Yes, that's how things stand," said Varden, quite unconcerned. "I think the King has the idea that by bringing off the match he'll get the two warring leaders closer together and perhaps wear down Peter's opposition to the German alliance. It's rather a shrewd move on the part of the old boy."

"Varden, I could gladly strangle you for speaking of so unthinkable a match in such a tone! Why, it's impossible!" declared Fenton. "Such a thing wouldn't be tolerated in this civilised day. We're not in the Dark Ages."

"That's just where we are," replied Varden, amused at his friend's vehemence. "These Balkan kingdoms are farther away from 1915 in point of time than Ironia is from Canada in point of distance. Why, matches of this kind are quite common—the rule in fact."

"But—but will Olga consent to a marriage with this murderer, for that's all he is?"

"Of course," assented the other. "Olga is a sensible girl and has the warmly patriotic temperament so common to these Balkan people. The King's word is law, and beyond question. It's only a matter of time until——"

Fenton's rage slowly subsided, leaving only one phase of the case fixed in his mind. She was irretrievably lost so far as he was concerned. He had not seriously thought otherwise, of course, but every word that Varden uttered widened the distance that yawned between a Canadian of no particular rank, albeit a millionaire, and the semi-regal position of a Balkan princess. He got up and walked to a railing near which they had been standing, and stared morosely out into the tangled gloom of the garden. He stood thus for a moment or two before he felt the pressure of Varden's hands on his shoulder.

"What ever can be wrong with you?" demanded the other, somewhat testily. "Don't see any reason why you should take this to heart. Anyway, the chances are that the princess won't have to marry Miridoff after all. We're going to settle his hash before we get through with him. Look here—you're not in love with the girl!"

Fenton glared. Varden grinned.

"Oh, ho!" said the latter. He started to laugh, then checked himself sharply and patted his friend's shoulder. "So that's it? Never mind, Don, you'll soon get over it. I wouldn't advise you to let this—er—fancy of yours go too far. They don't take kindly here to presumptuous strangers who show an interest in their princesses."

Fenton squared around, as belligerent and impetuous again as ever. "Look here, Percy," he demanded eagerly, "don't you think there would be a chance? Can't these ten-centuries-behind-the-times ideas be overcome when new-world determination and wealth and—well unbounded love, are combined to overcome them?"

"The idea's a new one," returned Varden. "As things have been up to the present you haven't the ghost of a chance. But there's going to be an upheaval, a general mix-up around here before the war is over, and perhaps Ironia will come out of it with some new ideas. Anyway, all's fair in love and war, and you're in both, I guess, now. Here's luck to you, Don, you headstrong old smasher of social barriers! I don't wish Miridoff any particular bad luck, but if I get a chance I'll direct a bullet his way myself."

"But look here," he added quickly, as another thought struck him, "you shouldn't be standing there. You're a marked man, you know, and you certainly make a fair target standing in this light. We had better be off now for home. I'll just hunt up my wife and we'll get away. By the way, I took the liberty of having your trunks sent up to our place. You'll stay with us from now on."

He drifted away and Fenton walked slowly back into the ball-room which was now beginning to thin out. For a few minutes he stood staring into the swaying ranks before him with eyes that saw nothing. He felt constrained and gloomy again, so that the almost Oriental splendour of the scene and the sensuous lilt of the music had no appeal for him. Then he came suddenly to himself, as though startled into consciousness by an electric shock. His glance had been arrested in its aimless course and held by the glance of another. Across forty feet of ball-room, interrupted by the frequent passing of whirling couples through the line of vision, his glance held that of the princess. There was interest, interrogation, perhaps something more, in the seriously beautiful eyes of Olga. She was unattended for the moment.

Like a sleep-walker, or a mesmeric subject, Fenton moved across the floor, staring straight ahead and letting the dancers dodge him as they might. He found himself standing before her and bowed with worshipping deference.

"His highness, the Prince Peter, is quite safe," he said in a low tone. "I knew you would want to know. I found Varden and he is setting out at once to give your father warning."

The princess thanked him. Fenton, glancing at her earnestly, was aware that her attitude had subtly changed. He made a bold decision on the instant.

"You said not so long ago," the words came rapidly, "that you would like an opportunity to get away from the restrictions of royalty and be—just one of the people for a time. Will you place yourself in that position for just a few minutes now? I have something to say to you. Will you permit me to speak, not as Donald Fenton, to Olga, princess of the royal house of Ironia, but as one man to one woman?"

The princess did not answer, but she did not glance away, and Fenton read in her eyes interest, expectancy, perhaps even a little fear. The experience of talking freely to a stranger, a young man, was distinctly a new one for her, but hardly one that could be entered upon without trepidation. To step from the well-ordered path of royalty, where nothing happened but what has been laid down by, tradition, was like a plunge into unplumbed depths. Suppose she found herself just a woman after all, and capable of falling in love with young men who were tall and straight with direct blue eyes and cleft chins?

"Then it's settled," said Fenton. Nothing had been said, but both knew that it was agreed he should proceed on the suggested basis. "I'm going to talk to you as a man in Canada would talk to a girl he was interested in; only more so, because I'm going to give you advice—something that even a Canadian might hesitate to do the first time he had met a girl. I've heard about Miridoff and—well, the rest of it. All I want to say is, don't give in to them! Don't allow any patriotic impulse to gain your consent to this monstrous match. The man is a rogue, a would-be murderer. Perhaps back in the Middle Ages it was considered proper for beautiful girls to marry men of his stamp, but this is the year 1915. If you could only see this thing from the new-world angle! Over there, not only is every man his own master, but every woman her own mistress."

Pausing a moment for breath, he hurried on: "A most extraordinary thing I'm doing, isn't it? Standing up and lecturing you, and on whom you should or should not marry, of all subjects! But I'm going to do a still more extraordinary thing. Remember, I'm talking as a man to a woman, and you for the moment are just Olga to me, not Princess Olga. If a man meets a woman and knows her for the one he was destined to love, and if he fears it may never be his great good fortune to see her again, why—he tells her of his love!"

He stopped, for over the face of his companion had come an expression of mingled confusion and sadness. As the dying sun catches the fleeting clouds and incarnadines them with a riot of red which spreads and deepens and then slowly fades away, so the lovely face of the princess became suffused with blushes.

"I fear we must return to the more conventional basis, Mr Fenton," she said hurriedly. "Perhaps what Olga might learn would serve to disturb the peace of mind of Princess Olga—afterward. Please do not say any more!"

"As you wish." Fenton felt vaguely troubled. "You know what I desired to say. That is sufficient. If I can ever be of assistance to you, command me. Perhaps," and he stood up very straight at the thought, "you may some day desire to step out of the mediæval ages into the twentieth century, to live the free life that the women of the west enjoy. If circumstances ever change so that you can order your own future without obeying the dictates of kings and meddling statesmen—if it ever comes to that, you belong to me! I love you; I loved you the first moment I saw you. If you could remain just plain Olga long enough you would come to love me too. I am so confident of it that, when you slip back into your high station again, it is going to be a great comfort to me that I could have won you if a king's whim and a foolish custom had not stood in the way. And, do you know, I almost feel that soon you will become very tired of being just Princess Olga and

long for the right to be Olga—a woman with a will of her own and the right to place her love where she wills. Until that time—good-bye, Olga."

For a moment they looked deep into each other's eyes, and Fenton read a message that gave him comfort, if not hope. Then he bowed very low.

"Your highness, I wish you good night."

CHAPTER IV

THE MEETING OF FOUR NATIONS

From the glare and glitter of the ball-room they stepped out to wait for their car—Varden and his wife and Fenton. The Baroness Draschol was a very charming woman of a striking Latin type. Varden, a strong man among men, was quite content to play second fiddle in the matrimonial partnership he had formed with this beautiful young Ironian. He fairly idolised her, and with every moment spent in her society Fenton understood more fully why. She was plump, merry, with flashing brown eyes that soon brought everything within their range into thralldom, and a voice trained to charm by that greatest of elocutionary teachers, Nature. She alternately petted her English husband and drove him to raging jealousy by keeping a flock of Ironian dandies in her train. The Baroness had paid Fenton the high compliment of not attempting to flirt with him, recognising intuitively perhaps that Cupid, the universal booking agent, had billed this blond young giant for another engagement; certainly recognising, for she was a shrewd young person and also very much in love with her husband, that no matter who else she may lay herself out to captivate, it is never wise for a wife to flirt with her husband's friends. Husbands do not like it. Accordingly she had welcomed Fenton as a friend, and they were already "as thick as thieves," as Varden put it.

The motor-car rolled up and Varden helped his wife in. Fenton was following when a figure suddenly sprang up from the darkness beside them and ran forward. The stranger's arm came up as he ran. As the man from Canada sank into the seat, two shots rang out in quick succession. Fenton felt his hat go and, with the sudden forward lurch of the car, he fell into the empty seat in front. This probably saved his life, for the second shot missed by a safe margin. At the first alarm, Varden sprang to his feet, and, after gazing hurriedly around, threw himself in front of his wife to shield her from the fire.

"On! Top speed!" he called in Ironian to the driver.

The latter responded promptly, and before the assassin could attempt another shot they had bumpily navigated a cobble-stoned curve and were skimming away over the pavement with a momentary increase of momentum.

"That was meant for you, Don," said Varden, settling back into his seat. "Hurt?"

"Never touched me!" responded Fenton. "Hat's gone, that's all. I'm convinced now that they really do take their politics hard in this country."

They soon arrived at the big house in the Lodz. In the hall Varden lingered a moment to whisper to his guest.

"Go right to your room and wait there for me. There's big business afoot to-night."

Fenton waited impatiently in his room. In a few minutes his friend appeared with a couple of heavy cloaks of dark cloth.

"We haven't much time," said the latter. "Slip into this and muffle yourself up well. It's chilly enough out at this hour, and in addition it wouldn't be healthy for us if we were recognised. Sharp's the word. The others will be waiting."

"You're most infernally mysterious about it all," grumbled Fenton. "Where are we going? What others? There aren't any more rhododendron patches to be visited, are there?"

Without replying Varden led the way outside. They let themselves out by a rear gate and quickly plunged into a maze of side streets. The city was more or less deserted. The air was chill and damp and the first streaks of dawn were breaking up the leaden darkness of the sky. They had walked for several minutes, for the most part along narrow, dingy streets with ancient houses on either side that seemed ready to totter forward through sheer old age, when Varden turned sharply and came to a stop in front of one of the largest and quaintest houses they had encountered. It was as dark and still as its neighbours on each side.

"Stairs are creaky, step lightly," whispered Varden, producing a latch-key which gave them entrance to a dark and narrow hall-way. "Can't be too careful, you know. Even a creaking stairway could be heard out there on the road now. The very walls have ears these days."

Clambering cautiously up two flights in darkness of Stygian intensity, they came to a landing across which fell a narrow strip of light, emanating from under a doorway. Varden knocked softly three times in quick succession and then twice slowly. The door was instantly opened and they stepped into a dimly lighted ante-room. The man who had admitted them wore the uniform of an officer of the Ironian Guards.

"You are late," he said. "Your friend?"

"By the prince's permission," responded Varden.

The officer disappeared into an inner room and returned almost immediately, motioning them to enter. They found themselves in a long room, very richly decorated. Fenton thought how oddly out of consonance it was with the outside appearance of the house. Around a long table eight men were seated, one chair being empty.

Fenton started and could hardly forbear from rubbing his eyes. Surely the tall man seated at the end of the table was the great English diplomatist, Sir John Chester?

The Canadian looked again and became convinced that his eyes had not been playing tricks with him. There was no mistaking the man who had figured so largely in the foreign policy of the British Empire. Spare, straight and muscular, Sir John was easily the outstanding personality in the group around the table.

And, piling surprise on surprise, next to him sat Monsieur D'Aubigné, the famous French diplomat. Sir John was speaking as they entered, each word falling with the incisive emphasis that was one of his best-known characteristics. Prince Peter was there too, seated beside a man whose face was vaguely familiar to the Canadian. Fenton studied the handsome, heavily bearded countenance of the stranger for a moment before he recognised him as Count Grobenski of the Russian Foreign Ministry. The rest of the group were quite unknown to Fenton, but he concluded that they were Ironians.

Then he remembered certain hints that Varden had let drop that afternoon to the effect that representatives of the allied nations were in Serajoz. Varden had been very mysterious about it, but Fenton had gained the impression that the object of their visit had been to bring Ironia to a definite stand.

Prince Peter rose and greeted the new-comers with a bow, motioning Varden to the vacant seat and indicating that Fenton should place himself in a chair at some little distance from the table. No words of introduction were spoken, but the members of the conference acknowledged Varden's addition to their ranks with formal bows. Fenton felt the cold, judicial gaze of Sir John Chester fixed upon him for a moment, and was also aware that the other men in the room subjected him to a more or less close scrutiny. Then the discussion proceeded in French.

"As you are aware, you, as representatives of the allied nations, are in Serajoz at my personal invitation," Prince Peter said. "Ironia has held back from entering the war because of our inability to gain unanimous support for any one policy. In arranging for this conference I was hopeful that it would result in uniting the factions, in convincing our people that the interests of Ironia are identical with the allied cause. Unfortunately I was unable to gain the consent of His Majesty to a formal meeting of the Advisory Council to discuss the war situation with you. I took it upon myself to meet you thus secretly with such members of the King's advisors as I knew to be of our way of thinking, as it was apparent to me that, before we could take any positive steps looking to Ironia's entry into the war, it was necessary that we have a definite understanding. We must know exactly where we stand before we take any determined steps to convince His Majesty that Ironia must join forces with the nations you represent. This explains the conditions of secrecy under which it has been necessary to hold this meeting. Your presence in Serajoz, gentlemen, is a secret shared only by those at present in this house. I have made arrangements for your safe departure. It is my earnest belief that within a week it will be possible to welcome you back in your official capacities to sign a treaty on behalf of your respective Governments, linking Ironia to the allied cause.

"Now as to the terms under which we could enter this war," he went on. "I believe we have reached unanimous agreement on all points. Britain would guarantee to finance us. Mulkovina and Serania would be restored to us in the event of victory. We, for our part, would be expected to place an army of half a million men in the field, fully equipped, and to maintain this force for the duration of the war. We have your assurance also that our loss in the export of petroleum to Germany would be fully met by the taking up of our total output by the allied nations. So far all is quite satisfactory from the standpoint of Ironia.

"I cannot let this conference dissolve, however, without setting forth in the clearest light possible the position in which our country stands. I do not want you to carry away the impression that this is a business proposition on our part, that we have waited until we could drive a hard bargain and enter the war with the surety of gain. Let me tell you that Ironia has suffered long at the spectacle of her sons and daughters ground down under the foreign yoke in the lost provinces. The only thing that has kept us from attempting to force justice by arms has been the knowledge that we would have absolutely no chance single-handed against the colossal might of Austria. If we enter the war now it will be not for considerations of national profit, but to free our brothers in Mulkovina and Serania from the hated yoke. Other considerations that have entered into this discussion have been necessary in view of our impoverished position as a nation."

In the pause that followed, Varden, seated at Prince Peter's left hand, whispered in his ear. The prince lent earnest attention and apparently considered the news that the Englishman brought of the gravest import.

"Mr Varden has brought to my attention a matter that must be considered before we disperse," said the Ironian leader. "The arrangement we have reached to-night depends upon my ability to secure action on the part of Ironia. It was tentative in that respect; you have pledged the honour of the nations you represent, but in no other respect is the agreement binding."

He paused as though reluctant to proceed.

"We can give no written guarantee," said Sir John, "as we are not dealing officially with the Government of Ironia as yet. I have, however, full authority to pledge the Government of Great Britain to the arrangement decided upon."

"If the honour of France is pledged by an accredited representative is any further guarantee necessary?" asked Monsieur D'Aubigné with an eloquent gesture.

"I am not asking anything which cannot be given," said Prince Peter. "But I have just learned that events are shaping themselves on the Russian frontier which may seriously affect the relations of our four nations. The Russian forces are mobilising close to the Mulkovian frontier, and there are evidences that an immediate advance is contemplated." He wheeled around and faced the Russian representative squarely. "Perhaps Count Grobenski can tell us of his Government's intentions. If the province is occupied by Russian troops, without Ironian assistance, will this agreement hold?"

The Russian diplomat returned his gaze steadily, but did not reply for a moment. The calm inscrutability of Slav diplomacy was reflected in every line of his countenance.

"Your information is quite correct," he replied finally. "I did not mention the fact of our mobilisation at that point as it is not customary to publish advance information of military movements. Is it necessary to impress on all present the advisability of keeping this information as strictly confidential?"

He paused again before proceeding. When he resumed, it was with slowness and deliberation as though each word required careful choosing.

"The plans of our general staff provide for an advance on our extreme left," he said. "If the movement is successful our armies will sweep across Mulkovina and Serania. I have no authority to pledge the restoration of these two provinces to Ironia if their permanent occupation is accomplished before Ironia joins us. The arrangement we have reached to-night is conditional, so far as Russia is concerned, on Ironia's entry before the movement I have mentioned begins."

There was a strained silence in the room. Monsieur D'Aubigné made a motion as though to whisper to the Russian, but thought better of it and subsided into his chair. Sir John Chester watched the two central figures in the discussion with silent concentration.

"What length of time does that give me?" inquired Prince Peter at last.

"Ten days at the most," replied Grobensi impassively. "The plans of our strategists must go forward without delay. The machinery of the Russian Army cannot be stopped while Ironia hesitates. I am speaking plainly, your highness. The situation must be clearly understood between us."

"Prince Peter has promised us that a decision will be reached one way or the other without delay," said Sir John. "I take it, Count Grobensi, that you can give him a week? Your pledge will hold good for that length?"

"Yes, my authority warrants me in going to that length," replied Grobensi. "But permit me to impress this fact. In view of certain considerations—some of which have been discussed to-night and some of which have not—if Ironia does not enter the war now, she might as well stay out!"

The conference broke up. Fenton saw Prince Peter leave the room conversing in low and manifestly earnest tones with Sir John, while Count Grobensi and Monsieur D'Aubigné walked out together, the latter's hand on the Russian's arm. The French statesman was expounding volubly.

When Fenton saw Prince Peter again it was in the ante-room. The representatives of the Allies had gone. Those left included Varden and one of the other Ironian representatives at the conference.

Varden then related the other side of the plot that had been overheard in the palace gardens. Prince Peter did not seem as disturbed as he had been at the information vouchsafed with reference to the Russian advance. He seemed inclined to treat the matter lightly.

"I do not fear them," he declared. "They would, no doubt, do me a mischief if they could. But I do not see why I should feel concern over the possibility of death from an Ironian bullet when we are working for an opportunity to risk our lives on the battlefield."

"But don't you see that Ironia's future depends upon your safety," urged Varden. "If they succeed in putting you out of the way, our chances of success will be infinitely small."

"I shall take every precaution, of course," promised the prince. "You can depend upon me not to risk myself unnecessarily. And now we must devise some means of following more closely the efforts of our adversaries. It is quite clear that they will stop at nothing."

CHAPTER V

AN ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION

As they spoke, there came a knock, three taps in rapid succession, followed by two slowly. The officer on guard opened the door a few inches and peered out into the intense gloom of the landing. After a brief colloquy in whispers with the new arrival, he stepped back and threw open the door. Came a woman, muffled up so securely in a cloak that nothing of her face and form was visible. She stepped into the area of flickering light provided by the dim gas jet and, loosing her cloak, threw back the hood.

Fenton's first impression was one of astonishment at her unusual beauty; his second an odd sense of recognition. She was small—*petite* perhaps would give a more accurate impression—but somehow her smallness seemed an essentiality. Although almost doll-like in sheer perfection of beauty, there was no suggestion of fragility about her. Her hair was a shimmering mass of golden curls dressed with a carelessness that was art itself. Bluest of blue eyes sparkled with animation; devastating eyes, no doubt, when their owner so wished, though now they glowed with serious purpose. The mouth was made for team play with the witching eyes, but it was firm too, very firm, as though she got whatever she wanted. "A determined little person," thought Fenton as, standing back in the gloom, he studied her face. "A little person to be friends with; and, unless I am mistaken, a little person who would make a very staunch friend. But I'm not sure that I would want to stand in the way of the little person's plans."

The new-comer was immediately drawn into an earnest conversation, conducted in low tones, with Prince Peter and Varden. The two men showed the greatest deference in their attitude toward the girl—a deference which apparently had its roots in deeper soil than men's regard for a mere pretty face. When she spoke they listened attentively and seemed to attach weight to her opinions. Fenton could not catch what they said so he contented himself with watching the girl, struggling meanwhile to fix that elusive sense of familiarity that became stronger in his mind every moment. Where had he seen her before? Then it came to him suddenly, a graceful gesture of the little person's arm supplying the necessary clue.

In his mind's eye he saw a crowded assembly hall, a large stage rather dimly lighted and a little figure that suddenly appeared in the centre of it. He saw her rise on her toes, smile a wonderful smile that seemed to grip the hearts of the fashionable audience and then glide into such a dance as the nymphs must trip as the first faint shafts of dawn warn them that their nightly revels are over. Anna Petrowa!

After a few minutes the prince stepped back into the room where the conference had been held and Varden turned toward his friend.

"Come here, Fenton," he said. "Mam'selle, permit me to present our latest acquisition, Mr Fenton from Canada. Fenton, this is Mam'selle Anna Petrowa."

Fenton bowed, and the Little Person, for as such Fenton had unconsciously pigeon-holed her in his mind, smiled. The smile brought back more vivid recollections of her triumph of that evening when he had watched her interpret divine music with her flying feet.

"I saw Mademoiselle Petrowa on her tour in our country," said Fenton. "That was three years ago and it need hardly be added that I recognised her."

The dancer looked up at him and smiled again. She had relaxed from the serious attitude maintained during her conversation with Peter and Varden, and did not seem at all adverse to the prospect of winning admiration from this big stranger.

"I like your Can—ada," she said, speaking English with musical limitations. "Some day I go back. Then perhaps I meet Mistaire Fenton again?"

"I trust our next meeting won't be so long deferred as that," said Fenton heartily. "I'm expecting to stay here in Ironia for some time—or until the little matter in hand is settled. I've enlisted myself as general assistant to Varden."

"And he's plunged right into the thickest of it already," put in Varden. "He hasn't been in Ironia twenty-four hours yet and he's already stumbled in on a secret meeting of the Society of Crossed Swords, dodged half a dozen bullets, insulted Miridoff to his face and made love to—some of our fairest ladies."

"I believe anything of Mistaire Fenton," said Mademoiselle Petrowa, "and especially that which you say last. But have care, Mistaire Fenton, these belles of Ironia—perhaps they aim their deadly glances more true than the men can shoot."

Their laughter at this sally was interrupted by the return of the officer, who had been summoned previously to the inner room.

"His highness would speak with Mademoiselle Petrowa," he announced.

When the door had closed leaving them alone together, Fenton turned eagerly to Varden.

"You promised me plenty of excitement if I stayed here," he said, "but this is certainly exceeding expectations. Anna Petrowa, *première danseuse*, engaged in an exciting intrigue in Ironia and turning up at a most ungodly hour of the morning in the dark ante-room of a mysterious house! What else have you got up your sleeve, anyway?"

"Let me tell you about the real Anna Petrowa," said Varden. "It will probably surprise you to know that she has been a Russian secret service agent for many years. She was born in Moscow, of very poor parents. They died while she was young, and I guess she had a pretty trying start in life, taking things all round. She was drafted into the Imperial ballet finally and soon made her mark as a dancer. At fourteen she had won recognition as a coming star. At nineteen all Europe was at her feet. She was a little over twenty when we saw her in Toronto, and at that time she had already been enlisted into the ranks of those who follow the most thrilling and dangerous game in the world—secret service."

"Twenty-four hours ago I wouldn't have believed all this," asserted Fenton, "but now anything seems possible. But look here, how in thunder does she happen to be in Serajoz?"

"She was dancing in Vienna when the war broke out," explained Varden. "It was not safe for her to remain there, so on instructions from Petrograd she came to Ironia to assist in watching Russian interests here. She naturally gravitated into close touch with our camp and we have found her our most valuable and active assistant."

"But what part can a pretty woman play in this rough-and-tumble business?" asked Fenton.

"Well, you see Mademoiselle Anna has made the acquaintance of one Lieutenant Neviloff, who is right-hand man to Miridoff. Neviloff has fallen head-over-heels in love with our bewitching Anna, and—well, she can simply twist him around her little finger. So you see we have a most excellent method of getting inside information from the opposite camp."

Fenton whistled softly.

"She's playing a pretty dangerous part, is our famous Mademoiselle Little Person," he said. "If they got on to the fact that she's working with us, I suppose it would go hard with her."

"The Lord have mercy on her if Miridoff ever suspects what she's doing!" said Varden gravely. "From now on she's going to be doubly valuable to us. You see, it's going to be necessary to watch them closely to forestall any attempts on the life of the prince. And we'll

have to depend on Anna Petrova for that. I don't know which of them is likely to stand in the most danger from now on, Prince Peter or our little dancer."

At this point the rest of the party returned from the inner room and an immediate move toward the street was made.

"There are two cars waiting in the next street for us," whispered Varden, as they cautiously descended the creaky stairs. "I am to accompany the prince home—sort of bodyguard, you know. Will you perform like service for Mademoiselle Petrova?"

They stepped out into the street to find that the darkness of night had given place to the light of early dawn. It was decidedly chilly. Fenton wrapped himself snugly in his cloak and dropped back beside the diminutive, muffled figure of the dancer.

At that instant a startled shout from ahead broke the stillness. Fenton saw a figure suddenly loom up out of the darkness with arm upraised. Something flashed bright in the hand of the unknown assailant as he hurled himself directly at Prince Peter.

Fenton could see that the man with gleaming dagger raised to strike the blow that would throw the control of Ironian destinies into the hands of the King's party was not alone. Another ruffian had emerged from the shadows of a deep court and was struggling with Varden. He could see that the prince, taken off his guard, had recoiled a step and was endeavouring to draw his sword, around which his cloak had become wrapped in a sudden flurry of the wind. All this the Canadian took in during the fraction of a second following the warning shout from in front. Instantly he stripped off his cloak and plunged ahead, throwing a word of warning back over his shoulder to his companion.

Fenton had been a star half-back in his college days. He covered the intervening space in faster time than he had ever done when the touch-line was ahead and the opposing wing men thundered after. The sound of his flying feet caused the assailant to pause and glance in that direction, which probably saved the prince's life, for before the dagger could descend Fenton's fist had found the fellow's jaw with a glancing blow. The blow was partly spent when it landed, but it had enough force left behind it to spin the assassin around to one side. The next moment Fenton's left hand shot forward and gripped the dagger arm.

The assassin was a wiry fellow, built on the lines most commonly seen in the Near East. He had short, bowed legs, powerful shoulders, arms of almost gorilla-like length. His large, hairy hands had an almost Simian strength, as Fenton found in the struggle that ensued. The fellow fought with the fury of a wild beast, writhing and snarling and struggling to reach Fenton's throat with his free hand. It was all Fenton could do to ward off that powerful paw which would choke the life out of him once it had found its grip. At the same time, it required all the strength he could summon to hold back his opponent's right hand, which still grasped the dagger.

They swayed back and forth, each straining for an advantage. It was a long time before the assassin relaxed his strenuous efforts for a winning hold. Finally, however, Fenton's chance came. His opponent stopped for a moment for breath, and his left hand dropped. Instantly Fenton stepped back and planted a short-arm upper cut in the general direction of his face. It landed fairly on the point of the chin. The ruffian crumpled up at the knees and dropped back on the ground with a thud. The knife, slipping from his fingers, clattered on the pavement at Fenton's feet.

The latter paused a moment for breath, then groped carefully for the knife in the dark. His hand had closed on the handle when Varden called to him.

"I've managed the other one," he said. "Let's make a clean get-away while we've got the chance. Discretion is the better part of valour, particularly when you've fixed up the lesser part of it."

Glancing around, Fenton was rather astonished to find that, with the exception of the recumbent figures of the two would-be assassins, they had the street to themselves. The prince and Anna Petrova had disappeared. Before he had a chance to express his surprise at this circumstance, Varden linked arms with him, and led the way at a brisk pace from the scene of the encounter. Turning the first corner, they espied a motor-car, the huddled figure of its driver silhouetted against the sombre, grey-black sky. Varden spoke one sharp word in Ironian, and opened the door. They slipped into the seats, and the car glided noiselessly away.

"Well," said Fenton when they had settled back comfortably, "where did the others go?"

"The prince's safety was, of course, the first consideration," explained Varden. "Then, of course, he couldn't risk being seen had anyone been attracted by the noise. If it were known that Prince Peter had been mixed up in an affair of this kind, awkward questions would be asked. Accordingly he waited until he saw that we were able to handle the pair, and then he quietly got away, taking Anna with him. It was extremely important that she should not be seen. By this time they've got safely to the other side of the town."

CHAPTER VI

THE KING'S COMMAND

The Princess Olga rose late the next morning. It is a popular myth that persons of royal blood live an entirely different kind of life from the rest of humanity. The universal conception of the life of royalty does not go much beyond gilded carriages, stately balls and glittering banquets. That a princess is liable to relax, to quarrel, to pout, to wheedle, to preen before mirrors, to enjoy the stray bits of gossip that a confidential maid may retail, to read forbidden novels on the sly, in fact to behave the same as any girl of the same age, is a view-point that few have really accepted.

There may have been princesses who lived the prim, stately kind of life that is popularly ascribed to them, and did not allow themselves to be affected by the emotions and weaknesses of common folk, but certainly Olga was not numbered among them. Olga was a princess on the fairly numerous occasions when appearances in state were necessary, but the rest of the time she was just a wholesome, vivacious girl—a girl who liked to ride and play tennis, to wear French clothes and read English novels and to bully everyone in the establishment, from her father down. She was certainly the most unconventional of princesses.

It was well after eleven when a ray of sunshine, finding its way through the heavy damask curtains, had the temerity to seek out the spot where Olga's head nestled snugly in the pillows. Her eyes fluttered and opened. She sat up a little grudgingly, shook back her tangled curls, and rubbed firm knuckles into unwilling eyes—just a pretty, sleepy-headed girl after all.

Anyone who knows anything about royal households knows that the first act of the day is to ring a bell which summons a retinue of maids. This is an established rule—of the novelists. But Olga did nothing of the kind. In the first place, there was no electric bell to ring, for Prince Peter's establishment, while very large and picturesque, was not fitted up with all the latest improvements; and in the second place, she would not have rung the bell had there been one. Instead, she slipped out of bed into a pair of warm, woolly slippers, ranged methodically on the floor with a precision that bespoke long practice. Then she went to the window and drew back the curtain a cautious inch or two, while she inspected the look of things outside. Satisfied on that score, she proceeded unaided with her toilet, and it was not until the really formidable problem of restoring her unruly curls to order presented itself, that a maid was summoned.

As the maid worked, she talked. Perhaps it was because she had found it necessary to talk in order to distract her royal mistress's attention from the tugs and pulls that invariably accompanied the difficult task of hair-dressing. Perhaps it was because all maids talk. The maid is generic and the Ironian type has as confirmed a failing for chatter as her sister in England or America or Thibet—if such an institution as the handmaid exists in the latter place. What is more, maids talk to princesses as well as to the daughters of brewers and tradesman and manufacturers.

The reason why so seemingly trivial a matter is mentioned here is that the chatter of Marie on this particular morning had a most far-reaching effect. If it had not so happened that Marie, who was part French and proud of it, had that morning talked to one of the coachmen in the household who had just returned from an errand to the residence on the Lodz occupied by Varden, where he had conversed with Paula, maid-in-waiting to the Baroness Draschol; and again if Paula had not overheard certain remarks between Varden and his wife, which she confided to the coachman, who in turn passed the news on to Marie; if, we repeat, any link in this chain of communication had failed, the whole future of the picturesque and warlike kingdom of Ironia might have been changed; certainly the future of one, Donald Fenton, might have been very materially altered. But all the "ifs" duly materialised, the highly interesting piece of news was handed along with the astonishing celerity with which such news travel in the under strata of society, and in due course Marie bustled into her mistress's room with the information fairly tingling the sharp end of her pert tongue. It was as though in working out a particularly intricate play, the Master Chess Player had shoved a pawn to its appointed square. It may be added that the information thus freely bandied among the servants of the two households was safe in their keeping. The Ironian in the kitchen will chatter to his fellow of what happens in the saloon above, but will suffer his tongue to be cut out before he gives anything away to the outside world.

The story that Marie had thus picked up was a more or less complete outline of the attempt made to assassinate Prince Peter early that morning and the part Fenton and Varden had played in it. With a skill that showed the buxom maid to be a diplomat of no mean order, she let a hint or two drop. The princess, her interest aroused, sharply questioned the adroit Marie and in due course got to the bottom of the maid's store of information. It may have been that, animated with the desire of your true raconteur to give the auditor the best entertainment, Marie elaborated a little on the original facts, deepening the sanguinary nature of the conflict, multiplying the number of the assailants and thereby gilding in the most vivid colours the valour of the heroic Varden and the strange "Amerrecan," whose name she had forgotten but in whom Olga readily recognised the impulsive Fenton. It having been demonstrated to her satisfaction early in the recital that her father had not been injured—Marie had seen him with her own eyes several times that morning—the princess permitted her chief interest to centre on two points, viz., the handsome stranger and the identity of the woman who had been in the party. On this last point Marie, much to her sorrow, had to acknowledge a complete lack of authoritative information.

During her breakfast, which was served in a cosy boudoir overlooking the gardens, the princess was very thoughtful, and at the same time restless. She toyed with the food and surprised the attendants into a bustling efficiency of service by her petulance. She had intended to ride, but changed her mind when the word came that her favourite mount was ready. Instead, she wandered into her sitting-room and ensconced herself in a sunny window with a book and her thoughts for company. They fought it out for supremacy, but it did not take long for the book to drop into second place. It was only after staring steadily at one page for ten minutes that she became aware of the fact that

she was holding the volume upside down. When she realised this, she allowed it to slip off her lap to the floor and, tucking her feet up under her on the couch, gave herself over to unrestrained introspection.

The story gleaned from the voluble Marie had given an added impetus to a natural tendency to revert to the events of the preceding evening. The attempt on the life of her father confirmed the story that Fenton had told her and brought conviction home on the score of the duplicity of Miridoff. She felt convinced now that the Canadian's version of the plot had been the truth in every respect. Thus she felt that she had done him an injustice—and the thought was a peculiarly disturbing one. A still more disturbing aspect was the matter of the future, now that she could estimate the real character of the man who might be selected as her husband. If the influence of Miridoff remained in the ascendant, she knew that nothing would dissuade the King from his determination to bring about the match. Alliances of an almost equally infamous character had been quite common incidents in the chequered history of the Balkan Kingdoms.

Had anyone been privileged to watch Olga as her mind grappled with this almost terrifying phase of the situation, it would have been seen that lines denoting determination crept into her face—evidence of a newly formed intention not meekly to accept the fate so cruelly and callously marked out for her.

There is a resiliency about the mind of the young that permits of rapid transitions of mood. The thoughts of Olga soon strayed from the grim possibilities suggested by the danger to her father and the machinations, both political and matrimonial, of Miridoff, into more pleasing channels. From every fresh topic that suggested itself, her mind went back promptly and inevitably to thoughts of Fenton, until finally she gave up all pretence and permitted her fancy to dwell with frank intentness on this interesting stranger. She admitted, to herself, the fascination she had found in him, and on analysis decided that it lay in the fact that he was absolutely different from any man she had ever met before. The type she knew, the Ironian of the upper class, was of short stature and almost Oriental swarthinness—suave, plausible, a diplomatic trickster, avaricious and limited in view-point to the traditions of his little country. Fenton had affected her much as a cool, bracing wind appeals to the jaded traveller on the desert where nothing has been encountered but fetid, almost poisonous air.

And then Fenton had dared to talk to her without any of the restrictions, the insincerities or euphemisms of courtly conversation. She went over again his daring hypothesis. Supposing she ever found the opportunity to face the realities of life, not as the princess but as Olga—the woman—what then? Could it be that what he had hinted at would actually come to pass?

Her chin found a resting-place on her arms. Her eyes were fixed with earnest intentness on the garden beneath, but they were filled with sights much less material. She saw beyond the court, beyond Ironia, a life full of all that could make life worth while—liberty, sincerity, love. She glimpsed many golden scenes from a possible future in which courts and crowns and royal pomp had no place, and from which Miridoff and her other Ironian suitors were strangely missing.

The gorgeously caparisoned footman, entrusted with a message for her, had to speak three times before she came back from the golden kingdom of Youth's Dreamland.

"His grace, the Grand Duke Miridoff," announced the footman, bowing obsequiously in exit.

Miridoff crossed the room toward her with military precision and dignity. He was a rather striking figure of a man, straight and but slightly inclined to portliness. Although in the early forties, his heavy beard gave him the appearance of being somewhat older. The Grand Duke's Teutonic derivation was most strikingly shown in the lines of his face. His eyes were clear, direct, domineering. Altogether he looked exactly what he was—a bold intriguer, thoroughly daring and unscrupulous and efficient to a degree.

The princess rose to meet him, extending a hand on which the Grand Duke imprinted a kiss rather more fervid than court etiquette required. It was noteworthy that, during the interview which ensued, both remained standing. Both realised that a crisis had been reached between them.

"Your highness, I am pleased to see that you are well and not unduly fatigued after the ball," he said. Then, after a moment's pause: "I am assured your highness is well aware that I would not have taken the liberty of so early a call had I not desired to discuss a matter of the utmost importance with you. Have I your permission to proceed at once with the object of my visit?"

The princess bowed in assent.

Her companion deferentially took her arm and led her over to a window—the very window through which she had gazed a few minutes before, while thrilling but impossible day-dreams crowded her mental horizon. Olga again fixed her gaze on the garden beneath; but this time her visions were of a different nature. She saw a future that was sombre, dull and drab, in which happiness was sacrificed to stern, forbidding duty and in which one figure—domineering and repugnant—stood out.

"There is a matter which has never been discussed between us," he said, vainly endeavouring to bring her to look at him, "although we both have understood it—the King's plans concerning us. I have just left His Majesty and I come to you on his suggestion—nay, on his command. His Majesty has seen fit to select me as your future husband. It was my desire that I be permitted to speak to you first. His Majesty enjoined a speedy effort on my part to reach an understanding with you."

Still Olga did not look up. Her day-dreams had fallen in ruins about her. Her fate, in the form of Miridoff, had overtaken her, and was demanding recognition. A half resolution slowly formed in her mind.

"The position," went on the Grand Duke, "is a difficult one. I know that I can discuss it quite frankly with you. His highness, your father, is unfortunately opposed to me at the present time on matters of state policy, but the arrangement that our all-discerning King has honoured me by making is one that will outlast all political differences. May I plead that the divisions now existing be not allowed to influence your regard for me nor to stand in the way of my great good fortune?"

Olga turned her face toward him for the first time and regarded him seriously and intently. Still she did not speak.

"It was in consideration of a possible prejudice that may have crept into your mind against the party I represent and which may have even extended to me personally that I begged the privilege from His Majesty of addressing you before his august wishes had been communicated to you," pursued Miridoff. "I feared that false impressions might have taken lodgment in your mind which I felt confident I could dismiss. And"—he leaned closer toward the girl—"I feared the affect of malicious gossip which I knew would surely reach your ears."

"No gossip can influence the opinion I have formed of your grace," said the girl steadily.

There was a note of quiet finality in her voice that would have been discernible to anyone with a less decided ego; but Miridoff either failed to notice it or did not pause to determine the correct interpretation. He went on confidently:

"The wishes of His Majesty are, of course, not to be gainsaid. I was too sure of your loyalty to entertain any doubts on the score of your consent, but I wanted to just lay before you testimony to my sincere devotion." He concluded with a low bow.

The self-assurance was so openly reflected in his attitude and in every word he uttered that the half-formed resolution in her mind became crystallised on the moment into a fixed determination.

"I trust that my loyalty to His Majesty will never be called into question," she said quietly, "but I cannot give my consent to what he has willed in this matter."

A flush of anger swept across his face. His cool assurance left him and a tendency to bluster became apparent.

"Do I understand," he demanded, his voice hard and rasping, "that you intend to disregard the express command of His Majesty?"

"I will not—I cannot marry you," said Olga. "I must ask that you accept this answer as final. If you entertain for me the devotion that you say, show it by using your influence with the King. Urge him to withdraw his decision."

"May I ask," said Miridoff coldly, "the cause for this inexplicable repudiation of the King's wishes? Why can you not become my wife?"

Olga faced him squarely. Her eyes flashed, her voice rang clear and high.

"A daughter's devotion comes before a subject's obedience!" she declared. "I refuse to marry the man who has plotted against my father's life! I believe in speaking my mind openly, your grace," she went on hurriedly. "If I could but bring proofs to His Majesty of what you are doing——"

This outburst did not entirely surprise Miridoff. He had fully expected that some word of what was going on beneath the surface of things would reach her. It was largely with a view of getting matters settled before further proofs of his duplicity could come out that he had gone to King Alexander early that morning and urged a settlement. Miridoff was not above wooing the girl at the same time he planned to encompass her father's death. He was, therefore, not entirely unprepared, and met the situation coolly.

"A most extraordinary charge you bring against me," he said with well simulated surprise and an elaborate show of sarcasm. "May I ask on what it is based?"

"Why maintain this pretence?" asked the girl, regarding him steadily. "It is part of your creed to stop at no obstacle that lies in the way of the fulfilment of your plans. My father stands in your way and we both understand, your grace, that you will not hesitate to sweep him aside if the opportunity comes. Perhaps I should not blame you so much as the system you represent. You stand for the principles that have been uppermost throughout the whole history of our unfortunate country! You have so little sense of right and wrong that you are surprised when the daughter of the man you are doing your best to destroy refuses to accept the hastily considered dictum of her King to marry you."

The princess had stepped away from him. Miridoff regarded her with a sudden passion that was remarkable in one of his deliberate purpose. She was indeed beautiful to look upon, more beautiful than ever now with her cheeks flushed and her eyes flashing their message of contempt. He watched her almost hungrily from beneath his dark brows. A strong approbation of her had always possessed him. In a sort of superior way he had admired her, and had pressed his claims persistently before King Alexander. But now her opposition fanned in

him a deeper flame. It suddenly came to him that henceforth every consideration other than the winning of this woman for himself would be of minor importance. A ruthless determination to overcome her took possession of him. But his craft did not desert him even in the face of this all-powerful emotion.

"I know the source from which this charge emanates," he said with a sneer, "and I am surprised that you take the word of an adventurer. However, I do not now endeavour to refute the charge, as events are shaping themselves which will eventually demonstrate how little truth there is in the story."

He was attempting to draw her out. A slight wave of colour that swept her pale face momentarily betrayed the interest that the princess felt in his veiled allusion to Fenton. A question almost escaped her, but she quickly checked the impulse to seek further explanation.

"There is an agent of the British secret service in Serajoz," went on Miridoff deliberately. "His name is Fenton. His errand is to do as much damage as he can to the German cause. His methods are typical of the perfidious nation whose dirty work he does. He has been in Serajoz but one day, and has already started his campaign of insidious lies. I have his record: a spy of the lowest order who once offered to sell secrets of the British Foreign Office to the Germans, and who is suspected even by the unscrupulous men who employ him. I feel it is my duty to warn you——"

"It is false!" The words escaped her in a sudden gust of anger at Miridoff's uncompromising charge. Next moment she was sorry she had permitted herself to be thus tricked into an avowal of interest in the Canadian. But her consternation was no greater than that felt by Miridoff. In her hasty exclamation and the championing flush of her face, the leader of the Society of Crossed Swords had discerned something that he had not previously suspected.

"She is actually interested in the fellow," he said to himself. Miridoff had recognised Fenton's power to do him harm, but had never thought of him as a possible rival.

"Olga!" The word, tense with feeling, escaped from him. It was the first time he had addressed her other than in terms of correct intercourse. Olga recognised something of the turmoil that was raging within him from the tone of his voice and glanced up. Unerring female instinct laid his secret before her: Miridoff was really in love with her!

"Olga," repeated the Grand Duke, "I never before realised what the fulfilment of the King's wish means to me. I want you for my wife."

The princess became cool again in the face of this sudden declaration. "My mind is fully made up," she said. "I am sure His Majesty will not adhere to his decision in view of my unalterable opposition. And so, your grace, I must ask that the subject be considered closed between us."

"You force me to extremes!" exclaimed Miridoff, roused to angry bluster again by her steady opposition. "Let me tell you this: the King's mind is made up. There are important reasons for the match. He will not permit the whims of a girl to interfere with plans upon which the welfare of the state depends."

"Perhaps," cried the girl warmly, "when King Alexander learns the truth about his servant, the Grand Duke Miridoff, he will realise that the welfare of the state demands the removal of that servant to some place where he will no longer be dangerous!"

Miridoff recognised that further efforts at persuasion would be useless. He turned to leave the room, but paused again for a moment.

"I have presented the case to you in but one light," he declared. "It was my desire that you obey the King's command willingly. But now let me tell you that nothing can stand in the way of your becoming my wife. His Majesty is determined. I am prepared to take an unwilling bride—and no power on earth can stand between us!"

CHAPTER VII

GENERAL LEBRUN

Worn out from the excitement of the night, Fenton slept well through the forenoon. When he finally awakened it was to a realisation of stiffened muscles and a general feeling as though he had been drawn through a threshing machine. He seemed one mass of bruises. A warm bath effected a partial revival, and then slowly and laboriously he found his way into his clothes, paying tribute with every move to the prowess of his unknown antagonist of the previous night's mêlée.

He found his host most impatiently pacing the library. Varden had not been down long himself but, to judge from his attitude, he had already come into possession of important news.

"Just in time, Fenton," said Varden briefly. "In ten minutes I'd have gone without you."

"Where?" asked the Canadian. His tone seemed to evidence a certain lack of interest, due possibly to his breakfastless condition.

"To the station," replied Varden. "I just got wind of an interesting piece of news. General Jules Lebrun, the hero of the French Army, is passing through Serajoz to-day on his way to Russia to consult with the General Staff of the Tsar. He has a stopover of a few hours, and his entertainment has been entrusted to me. As you probably surmise," went on Varden, lowering his voice to a discreet pitch, "the time that the General spends with me will not be entirely given over to social amenities. He has certain papers bearing on a suggested plan of campaign in case of—certain eventualities—which are to be handed to me. We may get an opportunity to discuss various phases of the plan. You understand, of course, the reason why this work is in my hands. It would not be politic for a member of the Ironian General Staff to be seen with the French general. I will serve as a go-between."

Fenton had spent the greater part of the time following the outbreak of the war in the south of Russia, so that such news of the progress of the campaign as reached him had been decidedly meagre. Nevertheless he had heard much of the spectacular work of the great little victorious French general, and Varden's news kindled in him a keen desire to see the famous fighter whose dashing tactics had done so much to win the Battle of the Marne. And then an idea occurred to him.

"Varden," he said, "has it occurred to you that the general's visit can be turned to great purpose in deciding the wobbling policy of Ironia?"

"In what way?" asked the other.

Fenton shook his head sadly. "As a newspaper man you always fell down hard when it came to grasping the dramatic possibilities of a story. As a diplomat it seems you are just the same. Percy, don't you realise the advertising value of Lebrun's visit to Serajoz? He has come right at the psychological moment to produce the proper dramatic effect.

"The Ironian people are Latin and so claim kinship with the French," he went on. "The influence of France is shown in every phase of Ironian life. The factor in deciding the sympathies of Ironia, next in importance to the question of the two lost provinces, is the love and admiration that the people here have for everything that pertains to France. Now then, Lebrun's exploits have been told and retold from one end of Ironia to the other. Just let it become generally known that he's in Serajoz, and you'll stir up a demonstration that will open the eyes of your stubborn King! I tell you, Percy, it's a heaven-sent opportunity. The hoarse roar of a thoroughly enthused mob will accomplish more than the carefully considered whisperings of all the diplomats in the country."

"But," protested Varden, "I must have an opportunity to talk with him. A popular demonstration is not just the best background for a discussion on tactics."

"Have your talk first," said Fenton confidently. "Then take our trump card out in an open fiacre and drive him slowly down the Lodz. Be sure that the good news is circulated well in advance. I tell you what—let me stage-manage this affair. I was always rather strong on the dramatic possibilities."

They talked the plan over in whispers, while Fenton bolted a ten-minute breakfast. Varden then hurried away to keep his appointment, and the Canadian began the busy task of arranging the "props" for the brilliant demonstration he had planned out.

No inhabitant of Serajoz will ever forget that day. The news that General Lebrun was in the city spread like wild-fire. His name was on every lip within an hour. Thousands of excited and enthusiastic Ironians rushed to the station only to learn that the little general had duly arrived and been promptly whisked away. Crowds gathered in the streets. Ironian and French flags were displayed on all sides, impromptu processions were organised, songs were vociferously chorused by the ardent townspeople, the "Marseillaise" being heard as often as the Ironian national anthem. Later, when Percival Varden drove out into the Lodz in an open fiacre with a little white-haired, powerful man beside him, the stage was all set for a demonstration, the like of which Serajoz had not seen since the memorable day when Alexander Sobiesku, first King of Ironia, was crowned.

The fiacre drove slowly up the Lodz between solid banks of agitated humanity. "Lebrun," "France," "War," were the words that one heard rising from out of the babel of sound. Excited men climbed on the steps of the carriage to grasp the hand of the gallant little Frenchman. Swords appeared above the heads of the mob, and the clamour for war became insistent and belligerent. The demonstration reached its height when the carriage rolled into the Square of Triumph, where a huge bronze statue of Sobiesku, the national hero of Ironia who had defeated the Turks in the War of Liberation, reared itself proudly above plashing fountains and luxuriant foliage. Here, immediately beneath the figure of the grim old warrior, they encountered another carriage containing Prince Peter. The King's brother rose and warmly grasped the hand of the grizzled French general. For several seconds they stood thus, while the crowds thundered their appreciation of the tableau.

Standing back in the dense throng, Fenton witnessed the scene with double appreciation, for he had himself suggested, and, in fact, arranged the setting. "Pretty effective," he said to himself. "If this doesn't shake the country off the fence I am out in my calculations."

He felt a pressure on his arm as though someone had gently tugged his sleeve. Next moment a slip of paper was pressed into his hand. Fenton turned as quickly as his crowded surroundings permitted but could discern nothing in the swarthy faces of those nearest him to indicate who had been responsible. Elbowing his way out of the crush, Fenton made his way to a deserted corner of the street and eagerly inspected the note. It was written in French in a feminine hand and contained neither address nor signature, merely the words:

"Dine at eight to-night at the Continental. Important."

CHAPTER VIII

THE QUARREL

The Continental Hotel at Serajoz is known to all travellers by reputation at least. It ranks with Shepherd's Hotel at Cairo, the Eis Arena in Berlin, Giro's at Monte Carlo. At the Continental one meets diplomats, statesmen, secret service agents from all countries. Many an extra tangle in the Near-East question has been tied at quiet, informal parties on the terrace of the Continental. The second Balkan War, when the rest of the Confederacy joined arms against Bulgaria, was planned one evening around a marble-topped table in a secluded corner of the terrace. Here revolutions have been plotted, dynasties have been overturned, assassinations have been coolly debated. To the average traveller the Continental is not in any degree different from other hotels of the same order except that it is perhaps a little larger, a little noisier and a little more tawdry in its appointments.

But ask an official of any of the foreign offices of Europe. You will get a polite and blandly evasive reply at first, of course, for that is the way of foreign offices; but get into the confidence of some official and he will tell you stories that make the wildest of fiction seem colourless and banal.

Fenton took his seat at a corner table on the terrace. He had confided his mission to Varden, who had earnestly recommended him to disregard the mysterious summons. Varden was convinced that the invitation was part of some plot, and quite as positive that Miridoff was behind it. There was too strong a tinge of romance to the whole incident, however, for Fenton to accept this prudent advice. The mystery drew him like a magnet, and accordingly the appointed hour found him at his corner table, watching the crowds that surrounded him with interest, while he puffed innumerable cigarettes.

The thronged terrace presented a cosmopolitan air that was fascinating to the Canadian. There were all sorts and conditions of men and women. Here a prince, scion of a ruling house; there a parvenu millionaire, every line of him and every move shouting his newly acquired wealth to the world. A party of American tourists, scintillating spots of fire from the jewels of their womenfolk, occupied one table. A thief of international fame lounged through, eyeing the company insolently. A fluffy mondaine on the arm of an officer laughed and chatted as she passed. Members of the highest nobility rubbed elbows with gamblers of the most doubtful antecedents. Beauty and vice sat side by side.

Fenton took it all in, but at no time did the thought that had obsessed his mind for the past twenty-four hours leave him. Fenton was in love. He had no doubts on that score himself. Most men have many love affairs and are deceived often, but when the *grande passion* comes they know. Fenton knew. Not for one waking minute since he had first seen Olga had he forgotten her. This had lasted a day by ordinary computation of time, an age according to the calendar of Cupid. She was at once the most wonderful, the most beautiful and the most inaccessible woman in the world. The Canadian's reason told him that he could never hope to win her, but his heart whispered to him to go in and win. Of one thing he was certain, that he would never leave Ironia while any possible hope of winning her remained.

The hope was strong in Fenton that the mysterious message was in some way connected with the object of his adoration. His eye had but one object in scanning the brilliant crowd with eager interest—to see if by any chance she were in the company.

The soft swish of a woman's gown warned him of a close approach to his table. Before he could turn a voice spoke almost in his ear, a very pleasant voice too:

"Good evening, Mistaire Fenton. It is most fortunate that you dine alone. I have something to say to you of the most importance."

Fenton sprang to his feet. It was Mademoiselle Petrowa.

"This is most unexpected good fortune," he said. Then he glanced around hurriedly. "But is it not indiscreet? Is it safe for you to make it known that we—er—know each other?"

"Quite," and her silvery laugh broke in ripples. "Come, do not look so—so tragic, is it not? Sit down and invite me to be of your company. I will then explain."

They seated themselves, Fenton still very dubious, she with demure grace. For a moment neither spoke. The little dancer regarded her companion with an intentness, behind which seemed to lurk an almost roguish interest.

"It is this way," she said finally. "I am playing what you call the double game. I find for your friends all that I can, but they—the other side—think that I work for them. It is needed that I so do, else I cannot be of use to the great cause, Monsieur Fenton. I tell to them some things that are so and many things that are not. The Duke Miridoff has entrusted to me many missions, and this morning he comes to me."

She paused and requisitioned a cigarette, lighting it daintily and deliberately.

"This is what I am to do," she said. "I am to watch one, Mistaire Fenton, most closely, to win his confidence, and if possible—but of course it is not so—to make him make love to me. Is the work my good Miridoff sets likely to be of the most difficult, *mon ami*?"

Had Fenton known of the scene between the Grand Duke and Olga of that morning he would perhaps have been able to understand the motive that had prompted the former thus to set a watch on his movements. Had he known the furious thoughts that surged in Miridoff's brain as he left the palace after the interview he would have understood why the little dancer had been deputed to win attention from him; and, knowing this, he would have been in a position to anticipate what followed. But as it was Fenton could make nothing out of it, and so stared across the table at his merry companion with palpable amazement.

"You mean that Miridoff has instructed you to follow me and to work up a flirtation between us?" he demanded. "What object can he have in that?"

"Is the—what you call it?—prospect—so dismal then that you must look so?" laughed his companion. "As for me, I am most frank, monsieur. I have had missions more disagreeable. But come, it cannot hurt you to help me play well my part. Smile, *mon ami*, look pleasant. The gentle Miridoff will have those here who report how Anna Petrowa does her work. See, I take one of these roses and put it in your buttonhole."

Plucking a bloom from the bouquet on the table she leaned across the table and deftly fixed it in his coat. For a moment their heads were close together. A stray tendril touched his face. She whispered in French:

"Monsieur, I have news—big news. Listen closely——"

There was a sudden interruption. A young man in the uniform of the Royal Guards of Ironia rose from a nearby table and stalked towards them. The dancer caught her breath in a way that almost suggested fright, and subsided into her chair. The officer frowned at her angrily, ignoring Fenton entirely.

"Anna," he exclaimed in Ironian, "come with me at once. I insist!"

"By what right, Lieutenant Neviloff?" demanded the girl.

"Come at once," repeated Neviloff in a hectoring tone. "I must not be trifled with. You are trying my patience."

The Canadian had not understood a word of the conversation, but he rightly judged the nature of it from the attitude of the others.

"What is it all about?" he demanded. "Shall I send him politely about his business or just drop him over the balcony?"

"Allow me to present Lieutenant Neviloff, Monsieur Fenton," said the girl, anxious to avoid a scene.

Fenton rose, and the two men faced each other steadily. The officer ignored the introduction, glaring at the Canadian in the most offensive way.

"Mademoiselle Petrowa accompanies me," he declared in broken French. "I warn you, fellow, to be more careful in future. Anna, come at once!"

"Not so fast!" exclaimed Fenton, his choler rising. "I don't like your way of doing things, Monsieur Lieutenant. Mademoiselle Petrowa stays where she is!"

Neviloff turned a furious red and took a step closer to Fenton with a threatening gesture. "You foreign pig!" he said through gritted teeth. "Leave while you may with a whole skin. You try my patience much. I shall spit you with my sword if you remain longer in my sight!"

Fenton laughed—a short, ominous laugh.

"You miserable little whipper-snapper!" he said, both fists clenched and itching for action. "If ever let myself go and lay hands on you—— Get out yourself before my patience runs out!"

"If you were of rank to be worth notice," retorted Neviloff with angry contempt, "I would slap you with my glove in the face, and then to-morrow morning I would end your miserable life. But as it is——"

A shrug of his shoulders and a gesture eloquent of his contempt followed. Fenton suddenly lunged forward and seized the officer's arm with a grip that almost paralysed that member. Half leading, half dragging, he propelled the unwilling lieutenant toward his own table. Arriving there, Fenton forced Neviloff down on his chair so hard that it went over backward, taking him with it.

"There," said Fenton. "Now behave!"

Neviloff scrambled to his feet with more expedition than dignity. His face was crimson with wrath and humiliation. With a sudden fury he half drew his sword from its sheath.

"It is too much!" His voice was high and shrill. "I kill you for this. This evening a friend of mine shall wait upon you. To-morrow I shall honour you, pig of a foreigner, by killing you, as I would a gentleman."

"Go as far as you like," said Fenton nonchalantly, turning back.

He walked back to his table to find it empty. The Little Person had gone. Fenton paid his score and left. He idled about the Lodz, which was brilliantly lighted at night, and on the Duntzig, where the orchestras played, for an hour or so, enjoying himself fully. The incident on the terrace he had dismissed from his mind. He did not, as a matter of fact, expect ever to hear of it again, but when he reached home Varden greeted him with a face of tragic concern.

"Look here, what have you been doing?" demanded the latter. "An officer of the Guards has just been here with a formal challenge from Neviloff. What in heaven's name have you done to offend him?"

Fenton laughed almost incredulously. "You must be joking," he said. "I haven't done anything. This Neviloff fellow tried to take Mademoiselle Petrowa away from me over at the Continental. He was most offensive about it. I stood as much as I could from him, and then I just led him back to his seat and made him behave."

"Is that all?" asked Varden in mock surprise. "Didn't you perform any little trivial politeness such as breaking a rib or two, or leave him a souvenir in the way of a couple of black eyes? Damnation, Fenton, they fight duels in this country on the strength of a side-glance of the eye, a shrug of the shoulder, an inflection——"

"Have I got to fight him then?" asked the Canadian.

"It looks like it," said Varden gloomily. "Either that or make a quick exit from the country."

"Which last is, of course, out of the question," said Fenton positively. "Still I'm in rather a fix. I won't put up much of a fight I'm afraid. Do I have the choice of weapons?"

"Yes, as challenged party you can choose the method by which this Neviloff will kill you."

"I know as much about a harpoon as I do about a sword," said Fenton reflectively. "I can shoot a little though. Make it pistols."

"Say, Don," protested Varden tragically, "what is it all about anyway? How did you come to get into such a mess?"

Fenton told him the whole story, and at the conclusion Varden swore vindictively.

"It was all arranged," he declared. "Miridoff is behind this. He instructed the girl to make up to you, and then had his handy man there to force you into a quarrel—a nice convenient form of assassination, quite worthy of Miridoff."

"Do you mean that Mademoiselle Petrowa was in with them too?" asked Fenton, astounded.

"No, of course not. I would stake my honour on her. Miridoff probably suggested that she make up to you, and, seeing an easy avenue opened up of getting into communication with us, she assented. Then Miridoff works this other trick and—there you are! Don, for the love of heaven clear out while you have the chance. They'll kill you sure if you stay!"

"I can't go," said Fenton firmly. "It would brand me as a coward—and I cannot leave that kind of a reputation behind me. But, Varden, there's one thing—I don't understand what Miridoff's game is in regard to Mademoiselle Petrowa! Why should he want her to entangle me?"

"I can see several likely reasons," answered Varden. "You have earned his resentment in the first place, and Miridoff always pays off his scores. It served as a good pretext for Neviloff to pick a quarrel in the second place. And thirdly—Miridoff is jealous. Your escapade of this evening will be reported in a certain quarter in a way calculated to injure you in the eyes of—a certain person. You see I know Miridoff thoroughly."

CHAPTER IX

A NIGHT OF RIOTS

Fenton had recognised the possibilities of a popular demonstration for the great French General, but if he had known how far public feeling would be aroused, he undoubtedly would have hesitated before suggesting that capital be made out of the timely visit of the French hero. As things turned out the appearance of the grey-haired general on the Lodz set in motion such waves of racial enthusiasm and warlike frenzy that Serajoz experienced one of the wildest days and maddest nights in all its wild and mad history.

The terms of the duel had been settled between the sadly perturbed Varden and a saturnine officer who called on behalf of the aggrieved Neviloff, and the former sat with his principal in a balcony that overlooked the seething, turbulent Lodz. It was after eleven o'clock, but the crowds were not thinning out, and the tumult seemed to be increasing in violence all the time.

After half an hour's earnest argument Varden had given up hope of persuading the Canadian to depart from the capital before he fell a victim to the skill of Neviloff, and now sat eyeing, glumly, the animated scene below. Suddenly, above the noise of the mobs, came the electrifying crackle of musketry. First there were a few sharp explosions, then gradually the firing settled down into the sustained din of a steady fusillade.

"That means trouble!" ejaculated Varden. "The Guards must be firing on the people down around the royal palace, judging from the sound."

Moved by a common impulse the two men rose. Varden brought out heavy caps and cloaks, so that when they emerged into the street they were effectually disguised.

"Lead on, right into the thick of it," admonished Fenton. "I'm afraid we've missed something!"

They had. When they reached the square in front of the royal palace, they found it jammed with excited humanity, except for a significant radius around the entrance. Drawn up across the imposing gates was a double file of soldiers.

"The Guards fired on the mob. A couple have been killed!" exclaimed Varden, who had picked up the information from the excited shouts of those around them. "The fat's in the fire, Don! If Alexander holds out much longer they'll burn the palace to the ground."

In the surging mob the pair were soon separated, Varden being borne off bodily in a panicky rush of the people to avoid a threatened charge by the soldiers. Loath to return home while the excitement ran so high, Fenton drifted along with the crowd. He witnessed a demonstration in the course of which every window in the Austrian embassy was smashed. He saw Turkish shops and Austrian restaurants raided. Street fights became a mere incident. The clamorous cry for war was heard on every hand, coupled with execrations of King Alexander. On one public square the stubborn sovereign of Ironia was burned in effigy.

About one o'clock Fenton found himself in a small Greek restaurant on one of the narrow mercantile streets that run off the Duntzig. He was hungry enough to overlook the uninviting appearance of the place and the decidedly rough-looking crew who crowded about the tables. He shared one table with a picturesque old foreigner with a battered, time-worn countenance, and apparel that bespoke either poverty or utter disregard for appearance. Fenton stared at the grimy menu card printed in Ironian that a tatterdemalion waiter presented, and pointed to one of the items haphazard. Luck was not with him, his selection proving to be a sallow omelet of uncertain composition but positive odour. One look at the steaming mess and Fenton's appetite took wings. He pushed the plate to one side.

"Monsieur has not learned to appreciate native cookery," said the foreigner, glancing up and speaking in excellent French. "Monsieur perhaps speaks French?"

"He does," replied Fenton. "And decidedly he does not appreciate native cookery."

"For ten years I have been an exile from my beloved France!" sighed the old man. "It has been hard, monsieur, very hard. But the hardest part has been to subsist on the reeking, nauseous stuff that these Ironians call food. But time can work any miracle, monsieur. To-day I, François Dubois, with a palate that once was educated to the highest Parisian standard, can eat even the omelet of an Ironian cook and—forgive the blasphemy, monsieur—call it good!"

Fenton twisted his chair around so that he could regard his table companion more closely. The old Frenchman had a care-lined face from which a pair of black eyes looked out with a virility strangely at variance with the lifeless grey of the mask in which they were set.

"How do you happen to be living in Serajoz?" Fenton asked curiously.

"It's a long story and would weary monsieur's patience in the telling," replied the old man. "In a word, I came here with a company of strolling players—I was an actor and a musician, monsieur. Ironia was in a bad way ten years ago. A revolution threatened, war with Turkey was feared, the Government was nearly bankrupt. We made so little money that our company disbanded in Serajoz, and here has Francois Dubois remained ever since, picking up a meagre living by teaching music to such pupils as he has been able to find. The thought that some day I would save enough to return to France has kept life in this useless old body, monsieur. But that hope is now almost gone!"

"You know Ironia well then?" suggested Fenton. "Tell me, what is the real sentiment of the people? Is this all froth or do they really want war?"

"The people of Ironia want war!" said the old man soberly. "Listen to me, monsieur, for I know of what I speak. They are a deep lot, these Ironians, deeper than most people think—fiery in love, implacable in hate, consistent in gratitude, eternal in revenge, deep, deep. They hate the Turk and the Austrian. They want to win back the lost provinces, and would rather win them back by fighting for them. The smoke of battle is incense in the nostrils of the Ironian."

The old man wagged his forefinger portentously at Fenton.

"If there is one man in Ironia blinder than all others it is King Alexander," he went on. "I, Francois Dubois, say so. Monsieur, I feel in the prophetic vein to-night and I am telling you this: that Alexander will not give in to the people. He is a stiff-necked man, this Alexander, and he believes in the divine right of kings. His pledged word as a monarch is more to him than the welfare of the country over which he rules. He will not budge one inch, monsieur, and I see the day not far distant when, as first step to making the war they have willed, the Ironians will take from Alexander his crown. No king can balk the will of a nation to-day—not even a nation in the Balkans!"

"You really think it could happen?" asked Fenton, a little incredulous. "If they did depose Alexander, who would succeed him?"

"The Prince Peter, perhaps," replied the old actor. "Or, more likely still, Ironia would become a republic like my own dear France! Ah, monsieur, it would almost reconcile me to dying in this country if I knew that the freedom of France had at last reached Ironia!"

"A republic!" ejaculated Fenton, bright visions flitting before him, conjured up by the old man's words. A republic meant the breaking down of social barriers, the abolition of royal families—and, therefore, of royal marriages. But then he perceived the absolute futility of the idea. What did it matter to him whether Ironia became a republic or not? That morning he was due to offer himself as a target to Neviloff, and the outcome did not seem at all uncertain. Almost unconsciously he started to talk to his companion, telling him of the impending duel.

"It is not uncommon for visitors to become embroiled with native officers, monsieur," said the old man. "Many a duel has been fought on grounds that smacked strongly of robbery. The upper-class Ironian, monsieur, is a cut-throat, a thief, with the manners of a gentleman but the instincts of a pirate. But," and he shrugged his shoulders, "I would not fear the outcome. I know my Ironian well. He is devilish handy with the sword, but a poor shot, an atrociously bad shot. Have courage; you are more likely to wing him yourself. And in any case, the duel—it has not often the fatal ending. Look at me, monsieur. In my day four duels have I fought—and at sixty-two I live to teach music in the gutter of Europe!"

Considerably comforted by the old man's words, Fenton took down his address on a card and left, promising to look Monsieur Dubois up on the first opportunity.

* * * * *

At dawn the Canadian accompanied Varden to a misty, silent field on the outskirts of the city, there to wait for Neviloff and his friends. They waited long past the appointed hour, until Varden, who had come in a mood of almost despairing protest, began to cheer.

"Something's gone wrong," he said finally. "Neviloff would not funk it, of course. This sort of thing is all in the day's work to Neviloff. But a hitch has occurred somewhere."

As he finished an officer came across the field toward them. He saluted and spoke in Ironian to Varden.

"Saved, Don!" exclaimed the latter when the officer had left. "Once again have you managed to evade the consequences of your rash conduct. Neviloff can't keep the appointment. The riots last night became so bad that the troops in the city have been ordered to remain under arms, and the gallant lieutenant will be chained to duty until the situation becomes less acute. In the meantime his slighted honour must go without redress. He sends most profuse apologies—for not being able to kill you this morning. Come on, Don, I feel as though I could enjoy a good breakfast now."

CHAPTER X

FATE & CO.

The particular department of the well-known firm of Fate & Co., to which had been deputed the difficult task of weaving a train of circumstances that would plunge a nation into war, had been working overtime during the forty or so hours that Donald Fenton had been in Serajoz. The web was being surely and unerringly spun, and already certain skeins that represented human lives had been closely interwoven. Three lives, indexed in the ledgers of Fate perhaps by soul numbers, but distinguished from other mortals on earth by the titles of Donald Fenton, the Grand Duke Miridoff, and Olga of Ironia, were so hopelessly tangled, it was apparent that in the unravelling process one or more might be snapped off. Peering at what was ahead, the grim official saw two men stand face to face with the world-old issue to be settled between them, at the same time that angry mobs stormed palace walls for a cause that a stubborn king had forsworn.

And with this objective in view the minion of Fate first prompted a prudent thought to take possession of the mind of Prince Peter that morning, and then saw to it that a whisper of a restaurant brawl and a duel, impending or already fought, reached the ears of the Princess Olga. Acting on the first, Prince Peter decided that in its upset condition Serajoz was no place for his daughter, and notified her that he had decided she must go to his county estate at Kail Baleski until such time as the trouble blew over, and acting on the second, Olga hurriedly summoned her carriage and set out for a house on the Lodz where resided her very great confidante, the Baroness Draschol. Not content with this, the untiring tangler of human skeins prompted a certain little person of exceptional personal charm and international antecedents to don the garb of a peasant woman, muffling her face in a hood, and to set off on foot by sundry unfrequented streets and alleys bound for the same residence in the Lodz.

When he had seen that the princess entered by the front portal at the very moment that the pseudo-peasant knocked at a rear entrance, and had furthermore satisfied himself that Donald Fenton had risen from the breakfast-table and had strolled aimlessly into the library, there to wait for his host who had been called away, the official of Fate was content to sit back and let events take their course, confident that now his human puppets could not deviate from the lines he had laid down for them.

Baroness Draschol received her royal friend in her own sitting-room, which was just across the hall from the library. There they chatted for some time. Olga soon gleaned such information with reference to the postponed duel as the prudent Varden had seen fit to trust to his wife. In the meantime the peasant woman, who had asked at the rear door first for Mr Varden and then for Mr Fenton, and had been admitted only after the transfer of a gold coin, had been escorted to the library, where she removed the heavy hood, revealing the pleasing features of Anna Petrowa.

Fenton, who was becoming inured to surprises of all descriptions, accepted this transformation with equanimity.

"Good morning, mademoiselle," he said, setting a chair for her. "I am delighted to see you, but not surprised. Nothing out of the ordinary has happened for half an hour or so. I felt that the inactivity wouldn't keep up much longer."

"I am so more than glad that monsieur has come to no harm," said the dancer quite earnestly. "I see it all now. It was a plot to trap you, and I an innocent part playing in it. But monsieur, I see, does not think of me as the double traitor."

She placed a finger on her lips to enjoin silence, and then, tip-toeing over beside him, whispered:

"I had not time before we were interrupted to tell the big news that I have learned, and thus have I risked all by coming here so in the broad daylight. It is this: Many of the army officers are with our cunning Miridoff, and a plot is spreading to force Ironia into war against Russia by the same means that they used with Turkey. A body of Ironian troops, acting without official orders, will cross the line to Russia and burn a village or so. The Russians, of course, they retaliate, and then war is certain to follow. It is all arranged, monsieur. Where or when I do not know. Word, I beseech, must be taken at once to his highness."

Fenton sprang up and paced the floor excitedly. "Of course, it is exactly what they would do," he exclaimed. "Last night has shown them that they cannot win by fair means. Mr Varden is out, mademoiselle, but will be back in a very few minutes. Word shall be taken to Prince Peter as soon as he returns."

In the course of a minute or so Fenton's thoughts, occupied with the important information that she had brought, turned to the consideration of how so vital a piece of news had been obtained. He stood in front of his intrepid companion and regarded her with stimulated interest and quite frank admiration.

"I can't understand it at all," he said. "Try as I may I can't really associate you with plots and counter-plots and secret meetings, and associations with all the rag-tag and bob-tail of Balkan intrigue. You are so fair, so young, so—well, so completely feminine that I can't see how you succeed in work that belongs, by its very nature, to the rougher animal, man."

"You are mistaken, Mistaire Fenton," she protested, "and your mistake is so thoroughly masculine! It should not be difficult for a woman to do the work I am doing. It is the work a woman can do best; it is subtle, it requires keen observation of the little things, it means

that always the right word must be used; it needs some personal charm, monsieur, and a thorough knowledge of how to exploit it. Women—and women only—can be depended upon for the more delicate missions of secret service. It is man—direct, blundering, outspoken man, who thinks judgment better than intuition—who does not fit into the picture."

"You put it so well that I am almost convinced," smiled Fenton. "Still, I don't like to think of you having to associate with the likes of Miridoff and his murder crew. There are two spheres in which I like to picture you—on the stage earning the plaudits of the world, and in a cosy chair on the hearth of some lucky man's home."

"You are quite hopeless, *mon ami*," she sighed. "Your view-point—it is so masculine—so one-sided. Man regards woman in but two ways—he wants to possess her and to show her off. If she feels that she must achieve more than man's fatuous approval he frowns, objects, bullies, even uses force to stop her. Is it not so?"

"It is clear that you have travelled over much in America," said Fenton with a laugh. "Are such ideas common among the women of your own country?"

"Advanced thought, it is found everywhere," she replied. The conversation was becoming too abstruse for her scanty English, and she abruptly changed to French, where she was more at home. "In your America the positions have been reversed. There it is the woman who has the complete freedom and the man who is tied. The American—he is too easy. He has but two functions left to him—business and the support of his women-folk."

"Mademoiselle is a sage, I see, as well as so many other things," said Fenton, not a little puzzled at the change that had come over her. From a dainty little person, full of coquettish wiles and sidelong glances, she had suddenly become a serious woman, full of the fire of earnest purpose and determination. Genuinely interested, he asked, "Tell me, mademoiselle, do you really like this life? Can you enjoy it, with all its dangers, its insincerities, its cruelties?"

For a moment she did not answer. Her glance wandered to a window and fixed itself on outer space, while a smile that was at once brave and wistful played at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes, I like it, *mon ami*," she said. "It is hard; it robs one of treasured illusions; it takes the silver finish off life and shows the brass beneath. A woman who plays the great game misses much that women are supposed to want—and do want. It may be that these things will be missed from my life, but—I will not regret them. This life means that I am standing alone, fighting against things, combating circumstances, and shaping them to my own ends, trying to grasp from an unwilling hand the fruit success."

"You are right," said Fenton emphatically. "It is the fight for achievement that makes things worth while. It is seldom though that a woman comes to a realisation of so virile a philosophy of life. There I go again," he said with a laugh. "My purely masculine judgment of women! But tell me of your experiences. I am sure you must have things to tell which would be of great interest. You have seen much of this sort of thing—this—what our statesmen call diplomacy."

Anna was nothing loath. In her inimitably pretty way she told of her life from the time when she first joined the Russian Imperial ballet, relating incidents in her struggles as a dancer, but more of her life as an agent of the secret service. She told of a certain affair at Monte Carlo, when documents had to be abstracted from a personage of royal rank; of the theft and recovery of important naval plans which had been the key to a significant and tense international crisis.

Fenton listened to her with an interest that was all engrossing, but all the time there remained at the back of his mind—despite her earlier admonition—a sense of incongruity. There was something irreconcilable with the accepted order of things in this dainty butterfly doing the work which kept nations from each other's throats, or helped to precipitate them into conflict.

As she talked the aforementioned Grim Official stirred himself up to complete certain complications that he had planned. He caused the Baroness Draschol to leave the Princess Olga for a moment. He impelled the latter to rise and stray into the hall. He then brought the dancer to her feet with a rather incredulous "How I have talked!" while she almost unconsciously put both hands into Fenton's and looked up into his face.

Neither of them heard the soft swish of a skirt in the hall. Neither of them knew that the curtains had parted.

"I have been so interested," said Fenton. "You are really wonderful!"

Then he turned in time to look into the rather startled, rather incredulous, rather angry eyes of Princess Olga. It was but for a moment, then the curtains fell back into place, and the intruder, with a murmured word of apology, had melted away again.

Having thus succeeded in effecting the desired situation, Fate & Co. proceeded briskly with what was to follow. Varden was brought into the library by another door, and into a most solemn conference with Anna. A brief meeting was engineered between Olga, the Baroness and Fenton, during which the Princess, with the coldest of courtesy, expressed her gratitude to Mr Fenton for the part he had played in saving her father's life, while Fenton, abashed and miserable, watched her with adoring eyes and a tongue that refused to attempt

the difficult task of explanation. Then a few precious moments were vouchsafed him alone with her. Olga did not appear too well pleased, but accepted the situation with good grace.

"Mr Fenton is staying long in Ironia?" she asked politely.

"I hardly know," replied the Canadian. "It will depend upon circumstances. I thought I might be useful here, but so far my presence has only served to create trouble."

"Perhaps we of Ironia do not understand your ways," she said, looking him very steadily in the eyes. "We may perhaps be too prone to take you seriously in everything you do—and say."

"Your highness, I trust you do not charge me with insincerity," said Fenton earnestly. "I have not been conscious of uttering a word which I have not meant. Let me explain——"

"It will be perhaps well for the simple maids of Ironia if Mr Fenton does not stay too long," went on the princess in even tones. "The strange new ideas that he holds of love, and all pertaining thereto, and the boldness of his address, might perhaps impress too deeply such as did not realise he was bent solely on amusement."

"You do not understand," said Fenton, "and you are unjust. You would understand if I explained everything to you, but unfortunately I am not permitted to do that. Matters of state are involved."

"Explanations are neither necessary nor desirable," said Olga calmly. Then she extended her hand lightly. "We may not meet again, Mr Fenton."

The Canadian touched her hand with his lips, then for a moment held it close in both of his. "We shall meet again, your highness," he declared confidently.

CHAPTER XI

THE ABDUCTION

The war riots continued in Serajoz with ever-increasing violence. Following the unsatisfactory events of the morning, Fenton spent several hours in Varden's automobile on a mission that took him to many parts of the city.

Late in the afternoon he returned, to find his host in a state of great perturbation.

"Things are certainly happening thick and fast," declared Varden. "The other side are prepared to stop at nothing, Fenton. The princess has been carried off!"

Fenton, too stunned for speech, listened with his mind in a turmoil, while Varden proceeded with a hurried and disjointed explanation. A note had just reached him from Anna Petrowa, containing the startling information that an attempt at abduction would be made. Shortly after two o'clock, on the instructions issued by her royal father, Olga had set out for Kail Baleski in a carriage with the customary retinue for travel. In the meantime the alert Anna had learned of a plan, formulated in the Miridoff camp, to have the princess abducted on the road and carried up to the hill country.

"But," protested Fenton in angry amazement, "what purpose can be served? It seems just as senseless as it is incredible!"

"The purpose is not hard to find," replied Varden. "The princess will serve as a hostage. Efforts will be made to force Prince Peter to withdraw the pressure he is exerting on the King by threats of violence to the princess."

"Miridoff, of course, will not appear in this," went on Varden. "It will be made to appear on the surface that the abduction has been the work of brigands. The princess will be carried up into the hill country and not released until Peter has been brought to terms."

"But how do you know they have carried her off? It is one thing to plan a daring coup of this kind, and another to accomplish it."

"As a matter of fact, Don, I don't suppose that they have actually got their hands on her yet, but there is no reason to suppose that they won't do so. Carriage travel is slow in this country, and Olga would hardly have reached Kail Baleski yet. As that is practically the start of the hill country they'll make the attempt thereabouts."

"Then it's not too late," said Fenton with a sense of partial relief. "I'm going to borrow your machine. There's a chance that I can overtake her in time."

In another minute Fenton was settled in the tonneau of the car, which rolled through the streets of the Ironian capital with a speed that increased as they neared the open country.

* * * * *

Ironia is a country of extremes. Unusual wealth rubs elbows with abject poverty. Grand palaces line the Lodz in Serajoz, and in the narrow streets close on either side human beings fight for a meagre existence.

The same rule of contrast holds with reference to the Ironian character. The peasantry are honest, hospitable, devout and ignorant. The upper classes, the aristocracy, who control the mining and industrial enterprises from which Ironian wealth emanates, are sharp, clever and quite unscrupulous. Only in the few old families which had managed to escape extinction in the Turkish wars does the innate nobility of the peasant character, purified by education and refinement, show itself. Peter was typical of the aristocratic minority; Miridoff of the majority.

Fenton discovered to what a sharp degree the law of contrast was carried in this picturesque country when the driver turned out of the crowded streets of Serajoz and guided his car with a steadily increasing hum along one of the wonderfully well preserved Roman roads that run out in all directions from the capital city, like the fingers of an out-stretched land. Back in Serajoz every evidence was to be seen of advanced civilisation. In the country they soon passed out of the area where their car was accepted as a matter of course. Fifteen miles from the city their progress through the many villages that dotted the road became marked by confusion and clatter, the peasants staring in open-mouthed amazement at the spectacle of the fast-moving car. It was quite apparent that the automobile was still an object of almost superstitious wonder to these simple souls.

The excitement which attended their progress became more marked when the driver turned off the main road and struck through a maze of winding side-roads that circled along the foot-hills on a gradually ascending grade. Crouched back in the swaying tonneau, a prey to fear and worry, Fenton made frequent use of the only Ironian word that he had learned before starting on this headlong pursuit, "Faster." The driver, who revered the car with the same zeal that a Christian will sometimes show in the study of an Oriental creed, obeyed with gleeful alacrity. He had always wanted to know just how fast it could be made to go, this devil-wagon with its intricate buttons and levers, the secrets of which he had studied in the same spirit as he would have approached the formulæ of a sorcerer. Having at last found a passenger of the same frame of mind as himself, Jaleski leaned over the wheel with a smile that brought his beaked nose down with a still more pronouncedly owl-like suggestion, and the wheels fairly lifted off the ground. The car skimmed along the curving highways; ascended steep grades with a graceful ease of a powerful bird on the wing; dashed through villages like a puffing, black Juggernaut; and spread a trail of chattering, fear-stricken peasantry in its wake.

To Fenton the ecstatic Jaleski seemed like a genie crouched over the edge of a magic carpet, guiding it with supernatural speed across an earthly continent. He expected that every minute would be his last, though he made no effort to stave off the impending doom.

But Jaleski proved an artist at the wheel. He brought the imagination of the East to the manipulation of the levers and bars of the materialistic West, and seemed to be able to coax extra speed from them without relaxing his perfect control. He appeared to tell by instinct just what lay beyond the next bramble-obsured turn in the road. He had an extra sense for knowing when to turn out for unseen obstacles. Fenton began to feel that a sorcerer was at the wheel.

They came in record time to the quaint little village of Kail Baleski, which shelters itself at the very base of the foot-hills, and has not changed in any detail for the last two hundred years. They found the place in a state of wildest turmoil. Crowds of villagers stood in the one street along which the village straggles with a vague suggestion of child-built blocks. As Jaleski regretfully brought the car to a stop they were surrounded by a mob who waved their arms and jabbered incessantly. Jaleski picked the purport of it from the babel of talk, and, turning a tragic face on his passenger, endeavoured to relate the disturbing news.

After questioning him impatiently in imperfect German, Fenton gave up the effort to establish intelligent communication, and climbed from the car. He reproached himself bitterly for having started out on so important a mission without bringing an interpreter along.

Finally, however, he perceived a possible means out of his dilemma. Walking down the street toward them came the village priest, benevolent and white-haired, in a worn cassock and rusty clerical hat that bespoke either the poverty of the neighbourhood or the ascetic character of the wearer. The old priest's face was clouded with the same trouble that stared so unmistakably and yet so unintelligibly from the brown faces of the villagers. Fenton addressed him eagerly in French, haltingly in German and finally in English. And, wonder of wonders, at the last attempt he found that he had tuned his C.Q.D. message to the lingual receiver of the old cleric.

"I speak some Eenglish," said the priest slowly. "Once was I in London. Your Milton and your Shakespeare, of much have I read."

"Fine, Father!" said Fenton, shaking the priest's hand warmly, much to the amazement of the villagers, who had backed away respectfully at the approach of the shabby old man. "Can you tell me what it's all about? Has anything happened to her highness?"

Slowly and haltingly the priest told him of the happenings that had so upset the usually placid village. Early in the morning a messenger had come with the news that her highness, the Princess Olga, was to arrive that day. Prompt preparations had been started at the

castle, the towers of which, standing up above the dark tops of the trees, could be dimly made out in the distance. An hour before, the royal carriage had driven into the village with a frightened driver, a partly stunned serving-man and an hysterical maid-in-waiting—but no princess. The equipage had been held up by a band of armed men about two miles back on the road. The Princess Olga had been taken from the carriage, placed on a horse and carried off with businesslike celerity. After frightening the servants by a threat to shoot them, the band had disappeared into the thickly wooded country through which a narrow pack trail led up into the hills. Such was the information that the padre retailed with saddened inflection to Fenton.

The latter, now that his worst fears were confirmed, lost no time in deciding on his course of action. He would first get whatever information could be secured from the servants, and then strike north for Kirkalisse, the northern estates of Miridoff, to which Olga would probably be taken. He was confident that he could cover the distance during the night if a capable guide could be secured. In the meantime he would send a messenger to Varden with the news and urge that assistance be supplied at once.

With the priest in tow to act as interpreter, Fenton interviewed the members of the prince's household who had figured in the hold-up. They gave voluble descriptions of the incident, but no information that was of any value to the impatient Canadian. The band had been very numerous, very fierce and armed like so many living arsenals—the serving people emphasised these facts with much reiteration—but nothing more definite in the way of a description could be obtained. The driver of the carriage, who saw in Fenton one whose version of the affair might carry weight, poured into the Canadian's ear a verbal eruption of harsh consonants which the priest interpreted as a recital of the valiant fight that he (the driver) and the other male member of the party had put up before they allowed their beautiful mistress to be carried off.

"He must be a valiant fighter," declared Fenton, "to maul these brigands the way he says he did and come off without a scratch himself!"

They were standing in front of the little village inn, and consequently their words sounded quite clearly on the street. He heard a sharp exclamation from a dust-laden stranger who was plodding his way wearily through the knots of villagers.

"Great Scott! Is it English I hear?" cried the stranger.

Coming forward he deposited his bundle on the road and shook Fenton's hand with every evidence of keen delight.

CHAPTER XII

INTRODUCING PHIL CRANE

The new arrival was a man of possibly thirty years, with twinkling blue eyes and brick-red hair. That his clothes were made of the best material and were cut by an English tailor were facts not to be gain-said, even by their tattered and torn and generally dilapidated condition. One sleeve of his coat was in holes and scorched with powder. He was hatless, and his hair, long and shaggy, tumbled about his brow. There was no need to ask his nationality. He was an Englishman—a travelled Englishman—since the two are very different beings.

"My name is Crane—Philip Aloysius Crane," he announced as he vigorously gripped Fenton's hand.

"Donald Fenton, at your service," said the Canadian.

"I am speechless, floored for lack of suitable words to express my delight at meeting someone from the tight little island," declared Philip Aloysius Crane. "You see I've been six months without hearing a word of English spoken except by myself—and in the state of mind I've been in I've been able to express myself only in terms of profanity. So you'll understand these—er—ebullitions, my unwonted—er—exuberance."

"You've got nothing on me just now," declared Fenton. "I started out on an important mission without knowing a word of Ironian, except the equivalent for 'faster'—and with the kind of driver I had that was the one word I didn't need. I'm just beginning to realise that I'm practically stranded."

"Then I'm just the man you're looking for," said Crane. "I talk Ironian like a native; or no, hardly that. I talk it with my tongue and not with my shoulders and eyebrows. If I can be of any service to you as interpreter, command me."

"I've got to find my way into the hill country," explained Fenton. "If you could come along with me it would solve the difficulty. But first I ought to explain to you that it might prove a pretty dangerous business."

Crane's weary face lighted up under its coating of dust.

"Danger! Why, my dear boy, that's what I've lived on for the last six months," he declared. "Goodness knows, it's about all I've had in way of sustenance up there in the oil country lately."

"The oil country?" This questioningly.

"Yes. You see I'm an engineer and supposed to know something about oil. If you know anything of this country you are aware that they have some big oil wells in the north-west section. As a matter of fact they've got about the finest certified gold mine in those same oil fields that I've ever seen, especially since the war broke out, and they've been able to sell petroleum to Austria and Germany at war prices.

"Another Englishman and myself signed on here three years ago," he went on. "All the work is done under the superintendence of imported engineers, mostly Austrian and German. Redfield and I were the only Englishmen there, and he left over a year ago—lucky beggar! When the war broke out things got pretty uncomfortable for me. You see, the owners didn't want to lose the profits they make on shipping oil across the border, and for that reason they've been fighting tooth and nail to keep the country neutral. I came under suspicion naturally and I suppose I was pretty outspoken. I had a dust-up pretty nearly every day with some of the others, and finally, when I tried to get out of the country to go home and enlist, they clapped me into jail. That was six months ago, and I've been there ever since—a filthy hole with a wooden bench as a bed and a family of toads as company. Four days ago I persuaded one of the guards—with the bench—to let me go. I got away safely enough, but one of the other guards nearly potted me. Since then I've been beating my way back to civilisation, begging from the peasants and sleeping under the glorious panoply of heaven. I haven't a cent in my pockets. I haven't even a hat. Perhaps you will now appreciate the faint stirring of pleasure that came over me when I met a man who talked English—and had a motor-car!"

Fenton decided that he liked this Englishman and that he could safely trust him. Accordingly he told Crane something of the mission which was taking him to the hill country.

"Suits me down to the ground," said Crane, gripping Fenton's hand again. "I'll go along as interpreter—anything at all so long as I get my share of the scrapping. I've acquired a grouch against the whole country that won't work off until I've battered my fists on some honest Ironian faces. I've stayed here six months at their wish; now I'll stay a few days longer on my own account and wipe off a few scores. Besides I came out here with a sneaking hope that I'd meet with romantic adventures of the Anthony Hope brand—you know, pink the prince and marry the beautiful lady-in-waiting and all that sort of thing. So far, the only Ironian women I've met have been honest peasant bodies who looked on sour milk as a luxury."

At this point the old priest approached them and intimated that it had been his intention to ask Mr Fenton to partake of his humble fare, and perhaps the new-comer, too, would join them.

They accepted; Crane with a readiness that spoke eloquently of the length of his fast. Fenton then hastily scribbled a note to Varden and handed it to Jaleski.

"Tell him, Crane," he said, "that he's to get back to Serajoz as fast as he can do it with any degree of safety. Tell him it's a matter of life and death, but that he isn't to run any risk of killing himself till after he's delivered that note."

Crane relayed the message to Jaleski, who acknowledged it with a deep obeisance and climbed with alacrity into the driver's seat. The car glided off and, with rapidly increasing speed, vanished into the distance. The cloud of dust that marked its course showed that Jaleski had understood fully the first part of the message, if not the last.

"Lord help anyone or anything that gets on the road between here and Serajoz this day!" said Fenton.

They followed the priest to a vine-covered cottage standing beside the village church. On entering they found themselves in a small room, scrupulously clean and reflecting an atmosphere almost of culture despite the cheapness of the sparse furnishings. A table and several wooden chairs and a small case of unsized boards containing a few ancient, much-used books were the chief articles that the room contained. At one end was a stone fireplace, blackened by the smoke of many score years. On the mantle above was a large crucifix. The table was set for a frugal supper of dried goat meat, black bread and fruit. The priest, with an air of earnest courtesy that might have graced the most sumptuous of banquets, bade his guests be seated. A silent serving-woman of rare old age but unimpaired activity placed two extra plates and the necessary knives and forks. Neither Fenton nor Crane needed any second bidding to fall to, for the former's appetite had been whetted on the trip from the capital, and the latter had reached the stage where a piece of dried leather would have seemed a toothsome morsel. The priest ate sparingly himself and watched the prodigious efforts of his young guests with a benevolent smile lurking in the fine wrinkles that time had written around eyes and mouth.

"Reverend Father, I shall always rank you a good first on my list of benefactors!" declared Crane with fervour when the last shred of food had been consumed. "I've sat down to many a fine meal in my time, but the memory of this will remain with me to my dying day. You've saved my life."

"What it is to be young," assented the priest, with a gracious delight in the exercise of his hospitality. "When youth and the good appetite together go even the coarse fare of a humble priest can seem good. My sons, it pleases me much your company to have."

"The pleasure is more than mutual," said Crane. "I assure you, Father, that I shall tear myself away with great reluctance. I shudder at the thought of our trip back into that hill country again. It is rough up there."

"I have a friend in the hill country," said the priest. "A letter you shall take to him and the best he has shall be yours."

Fenton, who had regretted every moment spent in the satisfying of even so clamorous a possession as his appetite, now made a motion to get up.

"Father, you know the urgency of our mission, and will not think ill of us if we lose no time in setting out," he declared. "The life of the Princess Olga may depend upon our promptness."

The old priest restrained him with upraised hand, speaking in a low and cautious tone.

"A word in your ear, my son," he said. "It would be well to depart when no one sees. It shall be given out that you stay as my guests to-night. After night falls you leave with a guide that I find."

"You mean that we might be spied upon?" asked Fenton.

The priest hesitated.

"Differences of opinion are found even in such small hamlets as ours," he said, with a trace of sadness. "Those are here—those who might carry word ahead of your coming."

"You know best, I guess," said Fenton, endeavouring to accept the priest's dictum with as little impatience as possible. "But how can I stay here when I know she is in danger—that every minute counts?"

"It's common sense, though, Fenton," broke in Crane. "I've lived in the country long enough to know that you've got to keep your business strictly to yourself. In a matter of this kind you can't be too cautious. If you want to be of real assistance in this matter you'll have to keep cool for a few hours."

Fenton, who had risen during the discussion, sat down again. The kindly priest laid a wrinkled hand on his arm with a gesture that was almost a benediction.

"Listen, my son," he said. "By this time she whose safety we all wish above everything else in the world far away has been carried. A man of God who has brought the message to our people for fifty years, has baptised the children, married the young people and shriven the dying, knows much that goes on of which he cannot speak. A guide I know who will take you where the Princess Olga is, and also he will lead you to where is found Take Larescu."

"Larescu!" cried Crane in so loud a tone that the priest glanced anxiously around and laid a warning finger on his lips. "You mean the famous leader of the brigands, the king of the hills, the man who defies any authority but his own, but who volunteered under another name and fought in the Ironian army as a private all through the Turkish War?"

The priest answered him in guarded tones, but with an inflection of pride that no need for caution could subdue.

"Take Larescu is great patriot, great warrior, great friend of my people, the poor peasants," he said. "Larescu has fought the rich nobles, he has robbed and, God forgive him, has killed. He has sinned much, but his good deeds are as the trees in the great forest. When the war for the lost land comes Larescu will be at the front of battle. He is wise, he knows much of the great world. He can save our princess, young sir. To Larescu must you go first."

"The people who live in the mountains are almost a different race from the rest of the people of Ironia," explained Crane to Fenton. "They're a wild lot, with a gipsy strain in them. The government of Ironia has completely failed to impose any legal restraints on them. They have their own customs, their own laws, and a chief who rules them as absolutely as any king that ever lived. But if war breaks out they'll go and fight for Ironia to a man. And, Lord, how they can fight! Their chief, Take Larescu, is a giant who can take on any three ordinary men. I've heard stories of the wonderful things he has done that you wouldn't believe, but which I know are more than half true. Larescu is a combination of Theseus and Robin Hood, with a dash of D'Artagnan thrown in. If our host can enlist his sympathies the rescue of the lost princess will develop into a pleasant little picnic party."

The three men sat around the table and conversed in low tones as the shades of evening settled down, the priest chaining the interest of his guests with tales of Ironia's turbulent history, stories of Turkish oppression, of wars fought for liberty, of feudal strife and internecine struggle. In broken phrases that somehow embraced a graphic power of vivid portrayal, he told the life story of a down-trodden people only now groping on the threshold of nationhood.

"Drive the nobility and the oilcrats out of Ironia and you'd have the makings of a great nation," said Crane, taking up the thread of narrative where the priest left it. He proceeded to give a more detailed account of his own experiences, telling of the vast extent of the oil-fields and the huge profits that the owners were making. An Ironian workman received a few pence a day, doing the work for which a man

elsewhere would receive as many dollars. The discipline was severe, almost as rigid, in fact, as in a penal institution. The law stopped practically at the boundary of the oil country; within that limit the word of the owners was law.

The priest listened silently, bowing his head in sad assent to many of the statements that the young Englishman made. Fenton also was silent, hearing but little of the conversation. He sat back in his chair and gloomily conjured up pictures of Olga in the power of the arch-villain, Miridoff. And Wellington, on the crucial field of Waterloo, did not long for night with greater intensity than did Fenton for the descent of the sheltering darkness which would enable him to start out on his quest.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE HILL COUNTRY

It was after ten when they quietly emerged from the house of the old priest. The sky was overcast so that not a star showed. A peasant silently emerged from the shadows at the side of the road and placed himself before them, hat in hand.

"Sashu will take you to Larescu," said the priest. "You can depend upon him. He is a peasant from the estate of his highness, the Prince Peter, and would give his life willingly for any member of the family."

"Father, you have indeed been a friend in need to us. I wish I could repay a small share of what we owe you," said Fenton, his hand straying toward his pocket.

Crane noticed the movement and nudged him under cover of the darkness. "Not that," he whispered. "They are very proud, these Ironians, and very glad at all times to offer hospitality. You would mortally insult him."

"Perhaps," said Fenton hastily, "there is something we could procure for the church—a new altar cloth, say. I would like to do something for your people in that way, Father. Suppose I leave the matter in your hands. If this is not sufficient we could fix it up on our return trip."

The old priest accepted the money that Fenton proffered with an eagerness that showed how deeply he had been touched. He thanked them earnestly, explaining that there were many things he could purchase with the donation. They struck off into the darkness with his parting benediction following them.

For a long time they tramped on in silence. Sashu, their guide, led the way along rough country side-roads, Fenton and Crane following side by side. After covering about half a mile in this way the villager turned abruptly to the left and led them up a winding path directly into the heavily wooded approach to the hills. The walking now became very difficult as the grade was a steep one and the ground rough. The two men began a conversation, but lack of breath rendered it spasmodic. Finally they reached a wider and fairly even road on which the ascent was more gradual.

"By the beetling eyebrows of Beelzebub!" gasped Crane. "Another hundred yards and I'd have been knocked out. The food you get in an Ironian jail doesn't fit you for mountain-climbing."

"I wouldn't mind the grade so much if the moon would only show itself," said Fenton, whose determination to get on to their journey's end had carried him through the ascent with less difficulty. "If we could only see where we were going we could make something like decent time over these hills. Our guide doesn't seem to be having any difficulty."

"An Ironian peasant can see in the dark," asserted Crane. "They're a queer lot—a good deal like animals in some ways. They don't look much farther into the future than the next square meal. When his stomach's full your peasant has just one ambition—to curl up in the sun and go to sleep. Beat him and he'll do your bidding like a sullen donkey, and the first time you come within kicking distance he puts his heels into you, figuratively speaking. Treat him well and he'll die for you like a faithful dog."

"Perhaps you could get something out of this picturesque fellow ahead of us," suggested Fenton. "Find out from him where we're going and when we can expect to get there."

"I don't think it would be much use," said Crane doubtfully. "The Sphinx is a positive chatterbox compared with one of these peasants. You have to treat them like electors; prime them with a gallon or two of extra strong liquor before you can pump anything out of them. I don't suppose you have anything of the kind handy?"

"No," replied Fenton. "That was another thing I forgot to equip myself with before starting out. It has just occurred to me too that I neglected to bring along a revolver. We're not very well equipped for an expedition of this kind."

Crane stopped short, and indulged in a hearty, unrestrained laugh.

"Fenton," he said, as soon as he recovered, "I'll wager you've kept your guardian angel working night shifts ever since you were born. By the twisted horn of the off ox of Ind! You start up into a mountainous country teeming with blood-thirsty brigands in pursuit of a band of villains who've carried off a princess—and with no other weapons than those with which nature was good enough to provide you. You accept the services of the first guide offered and, if his villainous visage is any indication of what we can expect from him, he'll cut our throats the first chance he gets."

"You don't need to come any farther," said Fenton, with some heat. "I warned you in the first place that it might be a dangerous mission."

"Don't misunderstand me," pleaded Crane. "This is only my way of expressing admiration. It's not so much that I admire courage as that I bow humbly before originality whenever I meet it. And lord, man, you are certainly original! I'll wager no one has ever tackled a job like this one before. But don't think I'm not as keen for the trip as ever. The longer the odds the better I like it. Only—I think it would be advisable under all the circumstances if I got as much information as I could out of the pleasant-looking cut-throat ahead."

He called to their guide in Ironian, and Sashu's deep voice answered from the darkness ahead of them. Crane quickened his pace until he had drawn even with the villager and for a space of ten minutes they talked. Sashu answered Crane's questions volubly. The latter then dropped back again.

"Friend Sashu is the exception that proves the rule of Ironian taciturnity," he stated. "He avers that we'll reach the place we're making for some time between now and morning."

"And where is he taking us?" asked Fenton.

"Well, he seemed rather vague on that point," acknowledged Crane, "or perhaps cross-examination isn't my long suit. I didn't get a great deal of information out of him on that point. In fact, not any. These natives are as close as oysters about the haunts and movements of Take Larescu."

"Then we are really being taken to the headquarters of this brigand chief?"

"We're headed that way," said Crane, "and likely to arrive provided we don't slip off a precipice on the way or meet any wandering parties of brigands. These hill billies have the pleasant habit of potting at you first and inquiring about you afterward."

"To think of the princess being in the power of these people!" groaned Fenton. "Say, Crane, can't we travel faster than this? Tell the guide we can't dawdle along this way any longer."

"It wouldn't be safe to go any faster, not in this darkness," protested the engineer. "Do you realise that the path we are on now is just four feet wide and that one false step would take us back to where we started from in about three seconds?"

Nevertheless, they responded to Fenton's impatience by quickening their pace and, in silence again, climbed higher and farther into the rough hill country. Sometimes they had a clear, even path, but more often Sashu led them along narrow ledges where the footing even in the daylight would have been precarious, so that they had to grasp hands and feel cautiously ahead before making a step. Sometimes they left the trail entirely and clambered up over the rocks, guided by husky directions from Sashu and sometimes assisted bodily by the guide. It was gruelling work, and in a short time the two westerners were muscle weary and puffing for breath. Fenton urged himself along after the last ounce of physical initiative had left him by conjuring up lurid pictures of the Princess Olga in the power of the unscrupulous Miridoff. Even when so weak that he had to clutch several times at a rock before gaining a hold, Fenton was able to spur himself on to increased speed by the thoughts of the possible dire consequences of delay.

They had finished a particularly difficult climb over a rocky promontory that projected across the path. Sashu cautiously swung himself down until his feet touched the narrow ledge of the path on the other side. Fenton followed suit, releasing one hand from its tenacious grasp of the rock while he slowly let his weight down. Unable to bear the full strain, the other hand lost its grip and, with a gasp of horror, Fenton felt himself slipping. He lunged frantically for a saving hold with the free hand, but the effort came too late. He continued to slip and came down so rapidly that, when one foot struck on the edge of the narrow ledge, his weight and the momentum of his fall threw him outward.

At such moments the mind acts with lightning rapidity. In the brief second that precedes a plunge to death, the events of a lifetime can flash in fleeting panorama through the human consciousness. Fenton thought of Olga, of the helpless position in which his death would leave her, of Varden, of Ironia and the war—and again of Olga. And then his downward, headlong fall was arrested, brought to a stop with a jarring, crushing violence! He felt a sharp pain in his head, and then darkness closed in.

When Fenton regained consciousness he found himself stretched full length on a ledge of rough rock. His left arm was hanging partly over the ledge. Soon he became aware of numbness and a racking pain in his head. The darkness of night had given way to the dull grey of early dawn, by which token Fenton knew that some hours had elapsed since his fall.

He groaned and shifted himself slightly with a painful effort. For a few moments he remained perfectly still, collecting his strength, and then raised his voice in a call for help. Immediately he heard an exclamation from above and a dark object showed against the grey of the wall of rock that shut off all view of the sky on one side of him. Fenton focused his wandering glance on this object and it finally resolved itself into a head peering over the ledge of the path higher up.

"Fenton! Where are you?" the voice of Crane floated down to him.

"Here," he called back. The hammering pain in his head made his voice seem small and far away.

It was several moments before the voice of Crane again reached his ears. "I see you now," he cried. "Thank heaven you're safe, old man! I've been sitting up here for a century waiting for dawn so that I could get down below and hunt for your body. Sashu left ages ago for help and ought to be back any time now. Are you badly hurt?"

"I think my head's broken," replied Fenton faintly, "and I suspect other injuries."

His voice apparently did not carry to the ledge above, for Crane went right on: "Cheer up, Fenton! I'll have you up out of there in no time. I believe I can see a path leading down there some distance ahead! Just keep easy in your mind and I'll soon be with you."

There was a long silence after that. Several times Fenton called but got no answer. The pain in his head became wellnigh unbearable. When he had just about convinced himself that the presence of Crane on the ledge above had been purely a figment of his fevered imagination, he heard a voice from behind.

"Here I come, Fenton. I don't believe anything but a bird ever negotiated this path before, but, by the tail of the sacred cow, such trifles as narrow ledges and the laws of gravitation can't thwart Philip Aloysius Crane! And what's more, we're both going back the way I came."

There was a short interval during which Fenton heard laboured breathing and the sharp impact of Crane's heavy shoes on the rocks, gradually drawing nearer, and then he felt a hand on his forehead.

"How are you, anyway?" asked Crane. "Don't think I was ever so thankful in all my life as when I heard your voice. I had given you up, of course. I sat up there on the rocks for three solid hours waiting for daylight so that I could do something, and I hope I never put in such a night again. Can you sit up?" he went on, quite cheerfully now.

Fenton exerted himself and, with the help of a powerful tug from his companion, struggled into a sitting position. He felt very weak and dizzy still, but his ability to move convinced him that he had sustained no serious injuries.

"Fine!" exclaimed Crane with enthusiasm. "You're a long way from dead yet. Here, I want your belt."

He took the belts from around his own and Fenton's waist and dexterously knotted them together. Then, slipping one arm under Fenton's shoulders, he helped him to his feet. Turning quickly he drew the latter's right arm around his neck and strapped him to his back with the belts.

"I'm too heavy a load for you," protested Fenton. "Strapped up this way I'll be able to walk all right. Let's try it anyway."

Crane straightened up until Fenton's feet touched the rock again. The latter's strength was slowly coming back, and after a moment's hesitation he stepped out. Thus slowly and uncertainly, with locked step, Fenton buoyed up by the pressure of the strap, they negotiated the steep pathway. Every few yards they paused to allow Fenton to regain his strength, and as the grade increased, these stops became more frequent and of longer duration. The path was a narrow and winding one that would have tried the skill and daring of an Alpine guide. It was plentifully interspersed with sharp corners, around which they edged with the utmost care, and rocks over which they laboriously climbed. A terrific strain was imposed on Crane, for there were times when he had to practically carry his companion, and the brunt of working their way over the obstructions and around sharp corners fell entirely on his shoulders. All that Fenton was capable of was an automatic power of motion. Several times they were on the verge of collapse into the yawning chasm, but on each occasion the coolness and intrepidity of Crane saved them. And in time they won their way to the top, though the feat had seemed practically impossible at the outset.

"Didn't think we could do it!" gasped Crane, as he dragged his companion over the edge of the road to safety. He fumbled with almost nerveless fingers at the belts, and when the knot was unloosed, two inert masses of flesh and bone sank limply on the rough surface of the rock. The path at this point was fairly wide, so that they could recline upon it with perfect safety. For a long time they lay there without a move, too exhausted even to speak. Finally Fenton turned a little toward his companion and stretched out his arm.

"You're a wonder, Phil," he said.

Crane sat up and gripped Fenton's hand. "A mere trifle, Don," he said. Then he gave vent to a glad halloo. "Here comes Sashu and a whole male chorus of brigands! I was beginning to think it was time he got back."

CHAPTER XIV

TAKE LARESCU

The hill people of Ironia were counted as giants, and their leader, Take Larescu, was a giant among them. He stood four inches over six foot, with the proportions generally of a grizzly bear. His head, carried at a dignified elevation, was covered with a red cap, closely approximating the Turkish fez in shape, and allowing a mop of curly black hair to protrude all around. If in his physical make-up he resembled the bear, his face showed a close approach to the fierce and noble lines of the eagle. With bold, commanding eye, heavy, hooked nose, and long black moustache, he gave more than a suggestion of imperturbable dignity and high-reaching ambition, while the general expression of his face showed determination, ruthless strength and cruelty. He was dressed in the usual costume of the Ironian, with broad white trousers and many-coloured blouse, and carried a brace of pistols in his belt. An incongruous touch was lent by an ornate scarab watch fob which dangled from his belt between the ivory-mounted pistols. If one cared to inspect this mountainous figure of a man in detail, further incongruities were brought to light in the heavy European boots and the knitted under-garment which showed beneath his voluminous sleeves.

Take Larescu stood on the side of a precipitous hill and watched a file of men slowly winding their way up toward him. His keen eye had already noted that the approaching party included two strangers, who from their clothing were apparently foreigners. The leader of the hill tribes did not waste much time in fruitless speculation as to the probable identity of the two new-comers, but, feeling in the loose folds of his scarlet sash, produced a decidedly modern-looking pair of field-glasses. Focussing them on the distant figures of the men toiling up the hill, he studied them intently for a few minutes. "Both Americans," was his mentally registered verdict as he closed the glasses and carefully replaced them in the ample store-room of his belt. Then from the belt he produced a cigarette and match, and later still an amber mouthpiece. The capacity of Larescu's sash was a constant source of wonder to those who came in contact with him. One could not help speculating as to what he would produce next.

The path up which the approaching party laboriously climbed brought them to the crest of the opposing slope, which was connected with the steep eminence on which he stood by a causeway formed by the fallen trunk of a huge tree. Hidden in the dense wood behind him, a handful of men could have held this position against an army. Moving with the apparent leisure of extreme ponderosity, Larescu took up his position at the end of the causeway, a formidable Horatius capable of holding the bridge against any odds. His new position was not taken for purposes of defence, however. In a booming voice he called out a gruff but hearty greeting.

Larescu studied the two strangers closely as they stepped cautiously across the fallen tree trunk. One was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, with an unhatted shock of fair hair. A blood-stained rag bound around his head indicated that this member of the party had met with an accident. The other stranger was shorter and broader, with a free and careless air, a much-freckled face and hair of flaming red. They in turn studied Take Larescu with an even greater degree of interest.

"Observe the comic opera Hercules," whispered Crane to Fenton.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Larescu, speaking in English. "I am indeed delighted to have you as my guests. You, sir, I regret to note, have had an accident."

The two travellers stared.

If the Statue of Liberty ever took upon itself to voice a message of welcome to incoming ships, the passengers would not feel a more complete degree of amazement than that which Fenton and Crane experienced on hearing this cordial message, phrased in the most perfect English, fall from the lips of this fierce and uncouthly apparelled brigand.

"Good morning," replied Fenton, recovering himself with an effort. "Yes, I had the misfortune to make a false step at a critical part of the trail. If it hadn't been for my friend here, I would be still lying where I fell. Am I addressing Take Larescu?"

"You are, sir," replied the Ironian, inclining his huge bulk in a courteous bow. "You are standing at the present moment where foot of any but Ironian has never before rested. That your mission is an important one I am assured, else my people would not have seen fit to escort you here. You are doubly welcome, sirs, if you bring news."

"Shades of Chesterfield!" said Crane to himself. "This isn't real life. If the orchestra doesn't tune up for a solo by the bass lead in a second or so, I'll know that I'm dreaming!"

Fenton in the meantime was fumbling in his coat pockets for a letter that the worthy priest had given him for the ruler of the hill country. He handed it over to Larescu, who immediately broke the seal and read the contents. At the conclusion he addressed them with even more cordiality than before.

"Mr Fenton, I am glad to know you, and you too, Mr Crane. You are just in time for breakfast. But before we sit down I shall look to your injuries, Mr Fenton."

He led the way back through the trees for some distance until they came to a low-lying, roughly finished house, with nothing on the outside to distinguish it from the typical Ironian abode excepting its size. Inside, however, they found cause for fresh astonishment. The room in which they found themselves might well have belonged to an Englishman of wealth and refinement. The walls were lined with well-filled bookcases and excellent engravings. There were plenty of comfortable leather chairs, and a thick rug covered the floor. Fenton and Crane looked the surprise they felt.

"You did not think to find anything of this kind up here in the hills?" chuckled the giant. "Yet if an abode of super-luxury could be concealed in the grottoes of Monte Carlo, why should you be surprised at finding such simple possessions as these in the mountains of Ironia? But I must not waste words while you, sir, are in such need of attention."

In another minute glasses of strong spirits had been placed before his two guests. Fenton felt a grateful warmth steal over him as he drained his glass. With almost professional deftness, Larescu examined the injuries that Fenton had sustained in his fall and adjusted fresh bandages.

"I know a little of medicine and surgery," he said, "and look after the health of my people. But now for breakfast, gentlemen."

They sat down to a meal of remarkable substantiality, backed up by excellent coffee. Fenton ate as well as his physical condition permitted. Crane, as he put it, made up for lost time; but together they could not equal the gastronomic feats of their host. The giant finished dish after dish with the appetite of a grizzly emerging from his long winter sleep. His table manners were as finicky and perfect as his capacity was immeasurable.

During the meal, which threatened to extend well on into the forenoon, Larescu talked on a wide range of subjects, giving an insight into the unique life that he led. He had travelled considerably. Each year he quietly vanished from his hill haunts and spent two months or more in the larger cities of Western Europe. He spoke French and German as well as English. He had studied medicine in London and Vienna, electricity in Berlin, and the art of living well in Paris. He was an omnivorous reader, and had magazines and papers brought to him at all times of the year. He knew something of music, much of philosophy and art, and all that there was to know on the subject of the government of primitive people. The wonder of his guests grew with each minute.

"I am telling you things about myself of which no one in Ironia, with the exception of my personal followers, has any idea," he confided to them. "In Serajoz they know me only as the leader of the hill people—and a rather good fighting man. You are the first guests from the outside world to sit at my table, and I have told you all this, serene in the knowledge that not a word shall go outside this room."

They hastened to assure him that his confidence would be respected completely. Larescu then went on to tell them of his work with the hill tribes; how he made and administered their laws, adjusted all differences that arose between individuals and even on occasions officiated at the marriage rites over the tongs, for the hill people, although intensely religious in many ways, still clung to customs that marked their blood relationship to the gipsy.

Finally, having completed his breakfast, Larescu shoved back his chair. His manner changed at once. "Now for business," he said briskly, even sharply. "My reverend friend, for whose opinion I have most high regard, has commended you to me. In what way can I be of service to you?"

Fenton hesitated a moment before replying. Divining quickly and accurately the reason for his guest's hesitancy, Larescu rose and, walking over to his secretary, fumbled through the contents of one of the pigeon-holes until he found a certain letter. This he placed in Fenton's hands.

"I judged from the padre's letter that your errand was in a certain sense a political one," he said. "Read this letter. It is from Prince Peter and will allay any uncertainties which you may have entertained with reference to my sympathies and trustworthiness."

A hasty glance through the letter convinced Fenton that not only did Larescu stand high in the regard of Prince Peter, but that he had pledged himself to the cause that Peter was championing.

"You must pardon me," he said to their host, "but the fact that I have been in this country a few days only is perhaps sufficient excuse for caution. I had only the assurance of the priest of Kail Baleski as to where you stood."

He then told Larescu of what he had heard in the gardens of the royal palace on the night of the ball, of the attempts on his own life and later on that of Prince Peter, of the carrying off of the Princess Olga, and finally of his own headlong pursuit. Crane, who had previously known little of the object of their journey, other than the mere fact that the princess had been abducted, hearkened to the recital with keenest interest and every evidence of excitement. The effect on Take Larescu was even more marked. He listened with a scowl that darkened as fresh evidence of the perfidy of Miridoff was brought forward. At the conclusion he thumped the table with his huge fist and swore with mighty Ironian oaths that he would not leave a stone standing at Kirkalisse.

"The Duke Miridoff is a double-eyed traitor!" he declared. "For German gold he would barter his country's opportunity to regain her lost provinces. I have a long score to settle with Miridoff. He has shown bitter animosity to the people of the hills. Three of my men were hanged at Serajoz ten months ago for a raid that his exactions had provoked. But now the day of reckoning has come! How is it your proverb goes?—This is the last straw that causes the worm to turn!"

The lust of conflict and the primitive craving for revenge showed in every line of the gigantic chief. The veneer of civilisation sloughed off. His eyes flashed, his nostrils dilated, and as he stood up his mighty arms swung menacingly like heavy flails.

"By to-night I can have three thousand of my men before the gates of Kirkalisse!" he declared.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRUMP CARD

The sun crept behind a distant mountain peak. In this country of little twilight the transition from day into night was speedy, and almost as Olga watched from her window the last rays seemed to vanish; symbol to her of the vanishing of hope and the encroachment of she knew not what.

She reflected, as she sat there by the window, on the events of the night before. Following her capture by a band of brigands, she had been convoyed through the hill country by a trail almost as difficult as that which Fenton and Crane had followed. They had arrived in the dense darkness of night at an old building perched on the crest of one of the highest peaks—apparently a disused hunting lodge. The fears of the princess, which had increased with each hour spent on the trail, were somewhat allayed when she found there were a couple of maids in the lodge. But while that was comforting in one respect, the fact that they evidently knew and respected her rank proved to her that it was no band of mountain marauders who had carried her off. The girls were not gipsies. Her first thought that she would be held for a ransom was replaced by a feeling of vague uncertainty.

The lodge had not been used for some time, although several of the rooms had been hastily furnished; furnished too with a certain degree of elegance. This was an added circumstance which provided the princess with scope for uneasy speculation as to her present position and the likely developments of the future. In a vague way she began to realise the motive behind her abduction.

Any doubts that may have lingered had vanished at noon that day with the arrival of a young woman who rode up a wide path around the mountain side from the opposite direction to that along which the princess had been brought. The new-comer was received with every evidence of respect by the two dusky brigands who guarded the lodge. Watching from the window of a room on the ground floor, which had been appropriated to her as a bedroom, Olga had felt a sudden stirring of resentment when she recognised in the fair stranger the woman to whom Fenton had been so attentive—the woman, moreover, who had involved him in a restaurant brawl and for whose sake he had been prepared to fight a duel. If Olga were still ignorant of the real nature and the depth of her interest in the Canadian, she must surely have been astonished at the jealous promptings which took possession of her as she surreptitiously regarded the dancer through the broken shutter which rattled in the wind outside her window. The new-comer undeniably was attractive.

The interview which followed between them had left the princess in a state of mental puzzlement and doubt. Mademoiselle Petrowa had told her a most surprising story, speaking in French for the benefit of possible eavesdroppers; a story of plots and counter-plots in which the narrator herself appeared in a double role, ostensibly an agent of Miridoff, actually a member of the Russian Secret Service. The story seemed highly improbable, and yet there was much to substantiate it—the presence of the dancer in Varden's library and her claim to having been on hand when the attempt was made to assassinate Prince Peter. And in addition there had been something about the little dancer, an air of sincerity, that had done much to impress the princess with the truth of her story.

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As Olga sat in the gathering gloom her thoughts were occupied largely by this surprising development. If the other woman's story were true, then her relations with Fenton might easily be understood. The princess was anxious to believe it, but doubts persisted, doubts which originated in jealous consciousness of the undoubted charms of the dancer. By this time Olga frankly admitted to herself that she had been, and still was, jealous. Her jealousy was a revelation to her.

The door opened and with firm, heavy step a man entered the room. Olga turned and saw that her visitor was Miridoff himself. His presence explained much that she had hitherto been unable to fathom.

There was an unmistakable change in the demeanour of the Grand Duke. He carried himself with the conscious air of a conqueror. He emanated triumph. He came, quite apparently, to dictate terms; but it was in tones of courtesy that he first addressed her.

"Your highness," he said, bringing his heels together with a stiff military bow, "I trust that I do not intrude. There is a matter which I must discuss with you immediately, however, and I must beg your attention for a few minutes."

Beneath the man's outward show of courtesy and his arrogant air, there was something sinister and threatening. Miridoff believed in pushing any advantage mercilessly. Against an unarmed adversary he would not hesitate to use his sword. Success bred in him no magnanimity for his opponent, but rather increased his presumption. Olga dimly realised something of the mental attitude of her adversary, and for the first time the real danger of her position appealed to her certainly and clearly. She faced him, however, with no evidence of fear.

"Am I indebted to your grace for the way in which I have been treated, for my detention as a prisoner in this house?" she demanded.

"No," answered Miridoff. "The motive for this was purely political. There is no reason why I should not explain it to you, though I did not come to discuss the ethics of your position here. By the time you are free to return to Serajoz certain events will have happened which will make it necessary for you to subscribe to the explanation of your disappearance now generally accepted—that you were carried off by a wandering tribe of mountain gipsies. No harm can come, therefore, of perfect candour at the present moment."

With an air of complete assurance, Miridoff drew a chair up close and sat down.

"I can see that your abduction was a mistake," he went on. "At least, it has been found unnecessary from a purely political standpoint. The advantage we thought to gain by getting you into our power was, of course, to hold you as a hostage against the continued activity of your august father. Two days ago, when all Serajoz was clamouring for war on Austria, our only hope seemed to be to force the prince to abandon the allied cause. Since then, however, the militant wing of our party has prevailed, and a plan has been put into operation that cannot fail"—he paused and regarded her with an air of intense satisfaction—"to bring Ironia into the war against Russia by this time to-morrow! The active opposition of your royal father is no longer to be feared. I have a reason for explaining this which you will perhaps divine later."

"Then you have come to tell me that I am free?"

"Not at all," replied Miridoff, his complacency quite unruffled by the obvious scorn in her tone. "It is no longer necessary to detain you for political reasons—the comings and goings of a hundred princesses could now have no effect on the course of events. But there is still a personal matter to be settled between us!"

He leaned forward in his chair and regarded her with an insolently possessive smile. As his gaze rested on her slender girlish figure and appraised the rich beauty of her face, complacency gradually gave way to passion and determination.

"You refused to marry me," he said abruptly, sharply. "I have come to give you certain reasons for changing your mind."

The princess replied with quiet contempt and a determination equal to his own.

"I refuse to discuss the subject with you. My decision was final. You may keep me here for ever. You may kill me. You cannot force me to marry you!"

Miridoff stood up and regarded her sombrely.

"Since our first talk on this subject I have not flattered myself that I could win you in any other way than by force," he said. "Consequently, force it must be. This is what I have decided."

He took a stride up and down the room before halting again in front of her. His tone, when he began to speak, was much the same as he would have employed in outlining a military manoeuvre. He could see but one side of the situation—his own determination to conquer the girl and the plan he had formed to accomplish that purpose. That she would suffer in the carrying out of that plan had not been taken into consideration. If this side of it had occurred to him, he would have dismissed it as an inevitable factor in any conflict of wills, and a quite negligible factor.

"Last evening his highness Prince Peter found it necessary to take the train for a point near the Mulkovinian border. We know the mission on which he was bound, and we are also well informed with reference to his future movements. This morning he left Bradosk on horseback and rode over to Ronda. He left Ronda three hours ago and expects to visit two other points during the night.

"As I said before, the influence and the activities of Prince Peter are now of no real consequence. In the face of the magnificent train of events which come to a culminating point to-night, your royal father is impotent, his efforts futile. But still, we do not believe in taking any risks. Sometimes the impossible happens. The success of our campaign will be just so much more certain if Peter is put out of the way.

"The road that he travels to-night runs through thick woods. At a spot well suited to the purpose will be stationed a member of the Society of Crossed Swords, one who has the reputation of being the best marksman in the north provinces. His highness is now beyond reach of any message. Even if his own party at Serajoz knew of his danger, they could not get a message of warning to him; for at Ronda he altered his previous plans and struck out in a new direction. There are no telegraph wires in the section where Prince Peter rides to-night."

He paused in front of her.

"The inference," and his voice was cunningly modulated to deepen the effect of his words, "is that your august father will not reach Serajoz."

Olga listened to the recital of this monstrous plan in silence, her mind literally numbed by its unexpectedness and brutality. The one terrible fact obsessed her mind: her father rode that night to his death and no power on earth could save him. She was powerless to exercise her quick woman's wit. She did not attempt to reason. It did not even occur to her to question the truth of what he had told her. The diabolical nature of the plot caused her all the more readily to accept as true his matter-of-fact explanation of it.

Miridoff had paused, but, as the girl did not speak, he went on in the same deliberate, even tone:

"The plan was not of my making. In fact in view of the relations between us, I was opposed to it—at first. I gave my consent knowing that I still had the power to stop the carrying out of that plan. The man selected for the work has gone. It was a wise selection; he is the most determined man we have. There is only one thing that will prevent him from carrying out the mission on which he has been sent. If this ring," he drew a gold band from his finger and held it up before her, "were carried to him, he would put his pistols back in his belt and return forthwith to Kirkalisse. A messenger who knows the mountain roads could leave here within the next three hours and arrive in time to save your father's life."

All the time he had been talking, Olga had sat with head bowed in statue-like rigidity. At last she lifted her head wearily, as if the physical movement were an effort. There was no longer defiance or determination in her glance. A dull fear was there and unwilling acquiescence. She had no other choice.

"What is your price?" she asked.

Miridoff slipped the ring back on his finger. "It will be sent when you are my wife," he said.

There was another pause. When Olga spoke again her voice was quiet, but had an oddly strained tone. "Tell me all," she said. "You have a plan——"

"Yes, I have arranged everything," replied Miridoff. "I have kept before me this consideration, that no hint of what occurs this night must ever be known to others. When the Grand Duke Miridoff weds the Princess Olga it must be in the cathedral at Serajoz with the full sanction and in the presence of His Majesty the King. But in the meantime, if the life of your highness's father is to be saved, the link must be forged that will bind you to me. To-night a band of wandering gipsies are camped in the Hawk's Rest, a short distance from here. I have arranged with the chief of the gipsies that to-night he will marry over the tongs a man and woman who will come to him. The contracting parties will be masked, so that not even the chief himself will know who it is he has joined together. When the ceremony has been performed, this ring is to be handed to him to be carried by one of the young men of the tribe to a certain rendezvous where waits the best marksman in the north country.

"I have arranged it in this way," went on Miridoff, "to convince you of the sincerity of my intentions. See, I give the ring to you as an earnest of my good faith. After the ceremony you shall hand it yourself to the gipsy chief, and see it passed to the messenger."

He looked at her steadily a moment, then went on: "There is one thing else. Let me warn you. The gipsy chief is the only one who shares with me the knowledge of where the messenger must go, and he is too completely in my power to divulge the secret—to be amenable to pressure from any source. So you see it is only by obeying me in every particular that you can save your father's life."

Olga had subsided on the couch, her head resting on her arms. Deep fear and a sense of the hopelessness of further struggle against this clever spider who had caught her in his web took possession of her. She knew there was no way out.

"The plan I propose is too irregular to please me," pursued Miridoff, "but it is the only possible solution. In three hours I must start out on a work of great importance. There is not a priest who could be brought here within the time, and in any case this is the only way that can bind you to me without advertising the method of our union to a gossiping world. Marry me to-night and to-morrow you return to Kail Baleski. It shall be given out that you have been rescued from the brigands who carried you off, and at once our marriage shall be properly solemnised before the Patriarch of Ironia. Is it not a most romantic marriage I am offering you?"

Olga stood up and faced him. Something of all that she was giving up, things known and things hoped for, seemed to present itself to her then in that fleeting moment. She covered her face in her hands.

"I will marry you," she whispered.

"Good!" cried Miridoff. "I knew you would see the matter in its right light, my pretty one." Then his voice suddenly changed. "But come, no more of this pettishness. You have taken the step now. Can you not trust me that you will not regret it?"

She remained quite motionless.

"I must go now," he went on. "In three hours' time you must be at Hawk's Rest. You must go alone. My men here will direct you. You will be given a mask."

He turned and strode towards the door. Arriving there, he paused and turned back. There was a moment's silence. Confused and distressed in mind as she was, Olga was conscious of a subtle change in his attitude.

"Olga," he cried, his arrogant composure giving away before a deeper emotion, "although to-night I have it in my power to make and unmake empires, I would rather fail in my mission than lose you. I told you that I would force you to marry me, and now I almost believe I am better satisfied to get you in this way. It has come down from the days of the cave man that an unwilling bride sometimes makes the best wife. Measure the depth of my love by the extremes I have adopted to get you!"

Her words followed hot upon his. "Listen, your grace," she cried, suddenly and passionately, "I am prepared to marry you to save my father's life. I do not know if he is really in your power as you say. It may be that you have lied. You are capable of gross trickery. But I can't withhold my consent on such a chance. The possibility of danger to my father is the only consideration. I will marry you, and if I find that you have tricked me—or if any harm befall my father now or at any future time—I swear I will kill you!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE RESCUING PARTY

"I wonder how much farther we have to go?"

Fenton voiced the query with rising impatience. For the past three hours they had been following a tortuous trail up and down the mountain-side, and the Canadian had chafed at the unavoidable slowness of their march. Beside him tramped Crane, his head with its flaring mop of red hair bent resolutely forward. Ahead of them was the towering figure of Take Larescu and, dotted back along the path by which they had come, was a long file of hill men.

"Can't be much farther," said Crane. "Larescu said we would make it in a little over three hours, and we must have been on the tramp fully that long now. I've come to the conclusion our bulky friend means everything he says. Even when he hashes up our proverbs and wise saws, he gets more sense into them than the originators."

"Larescu is a wonder," affirmed Fenton. "Talk about organisation! He's got this hill country trimmed into better shape than a political ward in New York. Now how do you suppose he found where the princess was being kept?"

"Well, he had five hours to work in while we were sleeping," said Crane. "News travel fast in the mountains. You may not credit it, but a word is passed along faster up here than in a crowded city. These hill people can communicate with each other from one peak to another. Fact. They've learned to pitch their voices so high the sound carries to almost incredible distances. I've seen proofs of it. Larescu probably has agents at Kirkalisse who ferreted out the news for him and then passed it along."

They tramped on for a few minutes in silence.

"Miridoff is up to all the tricks," said Fenton finally. "It would never have done for him to have had the princess taken to Kirkalisse. By holding her up in this deserted hunting lodge, he keeps himself clear of any blame in case of a miscarriage of his plans. Still he has made it easier for us. Getting the princess safely away will be a comparatively easy matter now."

"I am not so sure of that myself," rejoined Crane. "I think this grand ducal enemy of yours has something up his sleeve. In fact, I'm anticipating a stiff fight."

Larescu, some distance in front of them, had reached the crest of the precipitous mountain-side up which they had so laboriously worked their way. He turned back and stretched out his arm toward the west. On the slope of a distant hill rose the black towers of a building of imposing dimensions.

"Kirkalisse," said Larescu. He regarded the distant castle with a lowering frown. "I have a long score to settle with the master of Kirkalisse, a score dating back ten years. The balance is in his favour so far, but perhaps to-night I shall exact heavy payment for the wrongs the Grand Duke has done!"

"Are we far from the lodge?" asked Fenton eagerly.

"My impulsive young friend, accept this assurance that in half an hour her royal highness will be safely in our hands," said Larescu. "Do not worry. Everything is arranged. I have set my hand to the plough—as your proverb goes—and I shall gather no moss."

Half an hour later, in response to a warning gesture from Larescu, they stopped on the edge of a large clearing in the thick forest through which the latter part of their journey had taken them. It was rapidly growing dark, but at the far end of the clearing it was still possible to discern the outlines of a frame building of picturesque design. Two paths led to this structure, the one by which they had come and a second and wider road which wound off through the forest in the opposite direction.

"Your princess is there," whispered Crane, pointing to the building.

Fenton glanced eagerly across the clearing and dimly made out the figure of a man pacing up and down in front of the lodge with a rifle over his shoulder. As he looked, a second figure emerged from the lodge and, after a brief word with the sentry, strode briskly along the second path. There was something familiar about the carriage of this man that won Fenton's attention.

"Crane, that is Miridoff," he whispered to his companion, motioning after the receding figure. "I couldn't get a glimpse of his face, but I'm sure it's our man. That path must lead to Kirkalisse."

Crane fingered his revolver with a speculative air.

"I'm a fair shot, Fenton," he said. "It might save a lot of trouble if I potted him now."

"It wouldn't do," replied Fenton. "We have no positive proofs of his complicity yet and a murder charge is just as serious a matter here as it is under British law. No, I think we can safely leave the punishment of the Grand Duke to our doughty Larescu."

The leader of the hill men turned at this moment and cautiously made his way back to them.

"There are but two or three armed men at the lodge," he said. "We can take it without difficulty. I shall spread a line of my men around on all sides. Then a quick rush—and her highness is safe once more."

Crane, who had been regarding the dim outlines of the hunting lodge with interest, suddenly let drop a hasty ejaculation and grasped Fenton's arm. With every evidence of excitement, he pointed toward the building.

"Look at that!" he commanded. At the rear of the lodge the tops of several high trees elevated themselves in restive silhouette against the darkening sky. Above the level of the highest tree was a single mast that a casual observer would probably have mistaken for a flag pole.

"Wireless!" said Crane. "There's no mistaking the apparatus. I served as operator on an Atlantic steamship for a year and I ought to know a wireless plant when I see one. Saturnine Sisyphus, we're certainly in luck on this trip, Fenton! Here we've probably stumbled on the station by means of which Miridoff has kept in close touch with the Austrians across the border. If we keep our heads now we can find out his whole plan of campaign."

Crane's discovery necessitated new arrangements for the capture of the lodge. A rush from all sides as Larescu had planned would not now serve as it would give the defender an opportunity to send a message across space giving warning of the attack. As Crane pointed out, it was necessary to capture or incapacitate the operator before any attempt was made to rush the place.

Accordingly it was settled that nothing would be done, with the exception of establishing a cordon around the lodge, until Crane had had an opportunity to reconnoitre. The Englishman cautiously skirted the clearing until he had reached a point in the rear of the building. He investigated the clump of trees, from the midst of which the wireless mast protruded, and found that his surmise had been correct. A thoroughly up-to-date wireless plant had been installed.

As he moved quietly about, a light showed in a second story rear window. One of the trees grew close to the building, and Crane judged that, by climbing it, he would obtain a view of the lighted room. Accordingly he removed his boots and slowly worked his way up the tree to a position where he could see within.

A man in uniform sat at a desk with an oil lamp beside him. He was industriously working his key, his gaze fixed the while on a sheet of paper that lay spread out on the table. As far as Crane could make out the room was quite bare of other furniture.

For several minutes the operator stuck to his key, while not more than twelve feet away, crouching over a branch that bent with his weight, Crane watched every move he made with the utmost eagerness. Finally the man in uniform stood up and, holding the sheet to the lamp flame, carefully burned it to the last scrap. Then he left the room, closing the door after him.

Crane saw his opportunity. By edging along the limb he could bring himself within arm's length of the window ledge. Inch by inch he worked his way on the swaying branch, fearing each second that it would give way under his weight. It held, however, and at last he had the satisfaction of grasping the firm ledge of the window and swinging himself across to it. The window lifted easily enough and Crane climbed quietly into the room.

He had scarcely reached the floor when the sound of returning footsteps caused him to dash on tiptoe across the room to a commanding position behind the door. It opened and the operator stepped briskly into the room. The latter had almost reached his seat before he became aware of another presence in the room. His eyes opened wide and his jaw sagged with amazement when he saw Crane. The latter with a grim frown had stepped between him and the door and was covering him with a revolver.

"Make a sound and you're a dead man!" said Crane, in a shrill whisper. He conveyed his ultimatum first in Ironian and then in German.

The operator, after the first effects of his surprise had passed, recovered his wits sufficiently to seat himself facing Crane. This placed him in such a position that he covered the instrument on the table. Divining his purpose to operate the instrument behind his back, Crane brought his revolver up to a business-like level and covered his man.

"Stand up," he ordered.

The operator hesitated a moment and then got to his feet.

"Hands in front of you!" In a trice Crane had replaced the revolver in his belt, pinioned one of the operator's hands over the other and bound them with a handkerchief. It was done so neatly that, within a minute from the time the first move was made, the man had been unceremoniously shoved back into his chair with his hands bound in front of him. He appeared thoroughly dazed.

Then came an unexpected development. A light step sounded outside the door. Crane, who was proceeding to gag the pinioned operator, looked up and saw a girl standing in the doorway—a pretty girl who viewed his proceedings with every evidence of astonishment. Crane was thorough in his methods. He promptly left the task of trussing up the operator and dragged the girl into the room with more force than ceremony, taking the precaution to close the door and sternly admonishing her the while to keep silent.

"Not a sound out of you or I'll treat you the same way as I've done Marconi here," he said, seating her in the only other chair that the room boasted, and speaking in the native tongue.

The girl showed no evidence of fear, despite the rough handling she had received and the grim appearance of the aggressive Crane. She sat back quietly enough and watched his movements with keenest interest. Keeping a wary eye on his two prisoners the while, Crane took up the lamp and signalled with it through the window, moving it backward and forward in front of him several times. He kept this up until convinced that his signal had been noted. Then he placed the lamp back on the table and detached two revolvers from his belt.

"There's likely to be no end of a shindy downstairs," he said to the girl. "You mustn't get frightened, you know. You won't get hurt. Just stay where you are and close your jaw and no harm will come to you."

There was a sudden shout, a sound of rushing feet, a shot or two. Crane ran from the room and down a flight of stairs that opened before him, shouting at the top of his voice. He found Fenton and several of the hill men standing in the doorway. The lodge had been captured without a blow.

It was found that there were three men in the place beside the operator. The defenders had made no attempt at resistance, prudently deciding, when the numbers of the attacking party became manifest, that resistance would be useless in any case. They were bound securely in the lodge under guard. The two maids were confined in another room and also guarded. All this happened in the course of ten minutes.

"The operator's upstairs, safely trussed," said Crane to Fenton. "There's a girl there too, but I don't think it can be the princess. Hello! Here she is herself."

Anna Petrowa, holding the lamp above her head, had appeared on the stairs. She gave a cry of delight when she discerned the fair head of Fenton towering above the group of men in the dark hall.

"My brave Canadian, no time you lost in getting here," she said, coming down the stairs.

"How is it that you are here?" demanded Fenton in amazement.

"The Grand Duke's orders," replied Anna in low tones. "It was thought best that the princess should not be left without companionship. And then I was to keep a close watch on her. But this plan has not been the success. The princess has shut herself up and I have seen her but little."

"Where is she now?" asked Fenton, with all of a lover's eagerness.

Anna indicated a door leading off from the right of the hall. "You will find her there," she said. Then she placed a delaying hand on the arm. "Who is the extraordinary person of the very red hair? He made me a prisoner. He is the most rough, the most brutal—but——"

"Crane!" shouted Fenton. "I am going to leave Mademoiselle Petrowa in your charge. You apparently have amends to make to mademoiselle, who, by the way, has done a great deal for the Cause—more than any of us know. Could you manage to be polite for a while?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE RENUNCIATION

At times when the emotion runs high, considerations of a practical, artificial or conventional nature are often lost sight of; everything, in fact, recedes from the mind but the truly essential things. At such times one forgets caste, rejects pride and brushes aside the petty objections and restrictions that custom has hedged around us, and remembers only the deeper instincts that in reality shape one's course in life.

Olga was disturbed from the sad reverie into which she had fallen on the departure of Miridoff by hoarse shouts and the sound of running men without. When, brought to her feet by a knock at her door, she had thrown it open to find Fenton there, Olga forgot that she was a princess of the royal line, forgot that she had pledged herself to marry the Grand Duke that very night, forgot that life was sad, cruel, inexorable, forgot everything but that HE was there, that she was suddenly glad....

And when Fenton saw her standing in the semi-darkness, a slender drooping figure with infinite pathos in her soft violet eyes, he forgot that he had seen her but three times all together, forgot that on their past meeting they had parted with pronounced coolness, forgot that she was born to the purple of royalty, forgot everything but that he loved her and that she was meant to be his.... And so both lost sight of all considerations, practical, artificial or conventional, and remembered the only truly essential thing in life to them. Fenton gathered her up in his arms. Olga yielded willingly, gladly.

Such moments, however, are brief. On second thoughts these same considerations of a practical, artificial or conventional nature come trooping back into the mind, stern judges who mercilessly point out the folly of one's course in temporarily forgetting them. Fenton, exalted beyond all compare by her unexpected surrender, rained kisses on her hair, her brow, her eyes, her nose, the dimple in her cheek. When he reached her lips, the meaning of it all came back to Olga. She began to remember again, her position, her promise—and Miridoff. Breaking from his embrace with sudden strength, she ran to the couch and threw herself upon it, burying her head in her arms while passionate sobs shook her.

From the lofty heights of exultation, Fenton descended to the barren plain of uncertainty and bewilderment. Manlike he could not understand her sudden change of attitude, and manlike he stood over the couch and looked down at her ruefully and awkwardly. When he essayed to touch her she shrank away from him and her sobs increased in violence.

But Olga had been trained in a stern school and it did not take her long to conquer her emotion. The spell passed as suddenly as it had come. She sat up and dried her eyes and even (for a girl can remember such things at moments of deepest stress) patted her hair into shape again.

"Come, sit down beside me," she said quietly and compassionately. "There are many things we must say—and our time, alas, is so short."

Fenton sat down. He longed to clasp her in his arms again, she looked so pretty and fragile, but something warned him not to do so. Olga understood and rewarded him by placing one little hand in his.

"It was wrong," she said, looking him frankly in the eyes for the first time. "There can be nothing between us. Presently I shall tell you why. But first there are things we must tell each other frankly."

Fenton sat as if turned to stone. The loving abandon of her welcome had set his heart beating wildly with new hopes and aspirations. Now he realised dully that for some reason all hope would be taken from him.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

It was hardly necessary for him to speak. His answer shone in his eyes.

"I love you."

There was a pause. For a moment, an ecstatic, all-too-brief moment, her head rested lightly against his shoulder.

"I shall always have that to remember, to help me," she said, almost in a reflective tone.

"And you—you love me?" asked Fenton. His throat seemed suddenly parched and words came haltingly.

"Yes," whispered Olga, permitting for a moment the pressure of his arm which had stolen about her—but for a moment only. "I love you. And I am glad of it, even if it is wrong that I should."

"I loved you the first time I saw you," he said.

"I am not sure when it really started with me, but it must have been the very first time," said Olga musingly, almost forgetting the tragic realities of her position in the consideration of a problem so thrillingly important. "I *knew* when I thought you were making love to that other woman. Tell me that you were not."

"Mademoiselle Petrowa!" exclaimed Fenton, with a mirthless laugh. "Of course not. She's a Russian secret service agent and has been working for us. She's wonderful and brave and I admire her a great deal. But——"

It is sometimes possible to convey a clearer meaning by what we don't say than by what we might have said. Fenton's omission was eloquent and convincing.

"I am glad," said Olga, smiling her satisfaction quaintly. "She told me a story to-day that I wanted to believe. And now I do."

By mutual consent explanations on that point ceased. None further were needed. Olga and her lover each knew where the other stood, knew and were happy in the knowledge of the other's love. By mutual consent also they left off for as long as possible any reference to the catastrophe that threatened to wreck their happiness.

Finally, however, it had to be told. Olga, her resolution suddenly breaking, crept into the shelter of his arms when telling of Miridoff's cruel and cunning device. The story finished, she threw her arms around her lover's neck and with a paroxysm of weeping implored him to protect her, to save her from the hideous fate that loomed ahead. Fenton consoled her with brave words of consolation, while black thoughts filled his mind. A primitive desire to kill the cunning Grand Duke took possession of him.

"Don't cry, little girl," he said. "Of course there's a way out. You'll not have to marry that black-hearted scoundrel. To-night Take Larescu will have three thousand men hammering at the gates of Kirkalisse. And I personally guarantee that Miridoff will not get away alive."

But his face belied his words. Fenton realised to the fullest how cunningly Miridoff had laid his plans.

Slowly Olga extricated herself from his arms and dried her eyes. Her courage was coming back. She smiled at him bravely.

"I know you would willingly die to save me," she said. "But how would killing this man help me? Would it carry the pledge to the assassin who waits at an unknown point to take my father's life? No, dear heart, there is nothing that can be done. The spider has spun his web too cleverly. I—I am entangled."

"There will be a way out," said Fenton through set teeth. "I will find it. I can't give you up."

He seized her roughly in his arms and looked long and earnestly into her eyes. Then slowly his hold relaxed. He groaned, miserable and rebellious at his impotence. Gently she drew herself away.

"We have loved but to lose," she whispered. "Courage, my dear. Go please, go now. It makes it so hard——"

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO FIGHT: ONE FALLS

Fenton left the room with his mind filled with surging, angry emotions. For some time he paced up and down in front of the lodge, thinking over what the princess had told him and vainly cudgeling his brain for a plan to circumvent the Grand Duke. He could not yet accept defeat. Instead, he felt confident that there was some way out, that he could save her. The more he struggled with the problem and realised the cunning with which Miridoff had made his plans, the greater became his determination.

He finally sought out Crane and frankly put the facts before him. Although he had known the voluble and irascible young Englishman for little more than a day, Fenton had already come to place the utmost reliance in him. On the tramp that afternoon from Larescu's headquarters they had discussed the political situation in Ironia, and Fenton had unreservedly stated the incidents leading up to the abduction of the princess.

Crane heard of the latest development with every manifestation of deep anger. But his resentment, after all, had to spend itself in futile threats and mighty sounding oaths; he had no practical suggestions to offer.

"The part of it that I can't understand," said Fenton finally, "is with reference to the gipsy band who are to perform this infamous ceremony. I thought Larescu controlled all the people in the hills."

"You'll run into wandering tribes of gipsies in all parts of the Balkan countries," replied Crane, shaking his head. "They have no nationality. They come and go as they please and know no law but the word of their chief. One of the hill men told me to-night that some of the Pesth band were camped over there to the west of us. They'll do anything, these gipsies, if the reward is sufficient or the pressure brought to bear strong enough."

"It's my opinion that Miridoff is bluffing," declared Fenton, clutching at a straw. "He is trying to frighten the princess into marrying him. For all we know, Prince Peter is now safe at home in Serajoz."

But again Crane shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "When you know Ironia as well as I do, you'll realise that this is exactly what might be expected to happen. Prince Peter stands in Miridoff's path—he must be removed. The princess refuses to marry him—she must be forced. There is no way of warning the prince. If the pledge is not sent in the way prescribed—Peter will surely die."

Hastily, desperately they debated many plans, but discarded them all as either too dangerous or not feasible, and it was with a feeling closely akin to despair that Fenton finally realised the time had come for Olga to keep the appointment at the Hawk's Rest—and that he had found no way to save her. Then all of a sudden determination came to him. He sprang to his feet and grimly examined his revolvers to see if they were properly loaded.

"It may be necessary for the princess to go through with this marriage in order to save her father's life," he declared, with implacable purpose burning in his eyes. "But Miridoff shall never return to Kirkalisie. That I swear."

After arranging with Crane to see that Olga was escorted to the Hawk's Rest, Fenton set out with a guide for the same place. When he arrived there he sent his guide back and carefully reconnoitred the ground. It was a clearing on the crest of one of the highest hills. It was approached by two paths; one from the hunting lodge, the other from Kirkalisie. The latter road ran for a considerable distance along the precipitous side of the mountain. Up to a certain point it was wide and level enough. Not many yards from the junction the road narrowed till it became little more than a cramped path.

The gipsies were camped in the clearing. A large fire blazed in the centre, the flames rising at times almost to the tops of the surrounding trees.

Fenton decided to station himself as near the clearing as he could without being observed. The surrounding thicket presented ample means for concealment. He finally placed himself close by the path from Kirkalisie.

No clearly defined purpose had yet formed in his mind. He was prepared to let fate map out his course of action now, and it was probably with an instinctive idea of protecting Olga that he placed himself on the path by which Miridoff would come.

It was very still, save for the low hum of voices in the clearing behind. Fenton peered anxiously into the darkness. Three or four yards in front of him a bend occurred in the narrow path, and the brush on his left hid the slender ribbon of roadway. To his right was the precipice, a sheer drop of many hundred feet.

As he listened, the sound of footsteps came from beyond the bend in the path. They drew closer, and around the bend appeared the figure of a man. The new-comer was muffled in a military cloak, beneath which dangled a sabre. He wore a military cap. Fenton recognised Miridoff, and instantly the spell of indecision passed. An idea flashed through his mind, determining his course of action. Stepping forward, the Canadian barred the path.

"Stop!" he commanded in German.

Miridoff recognised the voice. "You!" he exclaimed, instinctively drawing back a pace and freeing his sword arm from the folds of the cloak. For a moment the two men regarded each other in tense silence.

"We are well met," declared Miridoff then. "You have crossed my path once too often. This time I shall finish you!"

"Well met indeed," said Fenton, with a grim laugh that had something of triumph in it—for suddenly there came to him a way to save the princess. "You come just in time, your grace, to enable me to carry out a certain plan. I need——"

Miridoff flung back his cloak and drew a pistol from his belt. Realising that a fraction of a second's delay would cost him his life, Fenton hurled himself bodily forward and pinned the Grand Duke's arms to his sides. The impact carried them back close to the edge of the precipice. The revolver Miridoff had drawn fell from his grasp and clattered on the rocky path.

"Presumptuous, meddling fool!" exclaimed the Grand Duke, straining to loosen the hold of his young adversary. "It is fitter that you die this way than that I should soil my sword."

"Trickster, traitor, assassin!" answered Fenton, exerting the utmost of his strength to maintain his hold on his powerful adversary. "You'll never live to complete your theft of a bride! Before you die—I want you to know—that we took the lodge an hour ago. The wireless is in our hands. Before I throw you over the cliff, think of this—your plans will miscarry, you will be remembered in Ironia as—the man who tried to sell his country!"

Fenton's breath had come in puffs; it was difficult to speak when he needed all his energies for action.

They struggled back and forth. Both were powerful men; Miridoff had the advantage in weight and strength, but Fenton was the more lithe and active. They were well matched. Almost on the edge of the precipice they fought it out, a grim struggle to the death. Once Fenton's foot slipped over the edge, but he regained his firm footing on the ledge again almost instantly. Miridoff, hampered by his cloak, managed to free himself from its folds. It fell under their feet and nearly ended the fight by tripping them both.

Fenton fought with calculating coolness, but his mind was in a turmoil. If he could master this man the happiness of the princess would be assured, for it would give him an opportunity to carry out the plan that had flashed through his mind a few minutes before. If he failed to conquer the Grand Duke, then Olga was lost.

The thought spurred him to something like super-human efforts. He struggled fiercely, animated with a determination to kill his adversary. He became the physical embodiment of that one idea. Miridoff must be put out of the way.

The darkness closed down more dense than ever over the tightly clenched figures. They swayed this way and that, careless of death that faced them both if they went a foot too far. At intervals Fenton caught fleeting glimpses of the red glow which he knew to be Hawk's Rest, where perhaps Olga was now waiting—unconsciously waiting the outcome of the struggle.

* * * * *

Then it became apparent that the equality of the struggle had ceased. One of the antagonists had secured a hold on the other's throat. The beaten man struggled backward to escape from the relentless grip of his opponent. His effort was successful. He broke away free. But his foot was over the edge. His effort to free himself had carried him back too far. An instant he swayed uncertainly on the edge, then fell backward.

The victor stood a moment silently glancing into the darkness through which the black, shapeless form had hurtled down.

Then he turned and picked up the cloak.

CHAPTER XIX

MARRIED OVER THE TONGS

From the blackness of night that had settled down over the mountains, Olga emerged into the clear space that was known as Hawk's Rest, in the centre of which was a blazing fire and about which sat in curious groups the gipsies of the Pesth band. The setting was weird enough and fantastic enough to have been transplanted from a past century, when the nomad was legion, and the comprachicos thrived under the wing of royalty. The uncertain play of the flames against the background of tangled firs wrought awesome figures out of the gloom, and, throwing a reddish tinge on the swarthy gipsy faces, rendered them unreal and grotesque. The band were dressed in the picturesque garb of the eastern nomad that has survived the changing influence of several centuries. Bedecked in the most brilliant colours, the women decorated by rouge and rings, the men with pistols and daggers, they presented in the flickering light a spectacle that one would never forget.

Muffled in a dark cloak and masked, the princess stepped into the lighted space near the fire. Of the timidity that might have been expected to manifest itself, not a trace was to be found. Her step was slow but resolute, and in her whole attitude a calm fearlessness was reflected. Truth to tell, Olga was as unconscious of external impressions as though she were treading the polished floor of a ball-room. Her mind was obsessed with a double fear that weighed upon her consciousness with deadening persistence—fear for her father's life, and fear for herself—afterward. She had no thought of turning back, no sense of self-pity, no idea of the magnitude of her sacrifice. Her duty was quite clear, but equally clear was the realisation of what it meant. As she stepped close to the centre of the gipsy ring she mentally bade farewell to youth, hope, love, happiness—everything.

The gipsy chief stood beside the fire—tall, withered, white-haired, a wraith of a man in fantastic garb that bespoke his rank. A gipsy chief is more absolute than any king; his word is the law of the band, his will the guiding factor. The attitude of the old gipsy was unmistakably regal.

Out of the shadows on the opposite side came the figure of Miridoff. A mask covered his whole face. He was cloaked and hatted for a journey, and his gait showed haste, even a degree of nervousness.

Olga went through the ceremony that followed in a daze. Standing in front of the hissing, spitting flames, her hand clasped in that of the Grand Duke and extended over the tongs, she heard the old chief's cracked voice proclaim the unknown words that tied her for ever to the man she had so much reason to fear and hate. As the ritual proceeded, the gipsies—seated far away it seemed to her from the monotonous sound of their voices, though occasionally through the intermittent flash of the flames, their faces appeared to glower directly at her through panes of magic flame—started up a chant. It was a mournful strain, gathering volume as it proceeded and finally culminating in an outburst of sound that expressed triumph and passion.

Was ever the sacred rite performed under circumstances more repugnant—gipsy tongs for an altar, a sinister gipsy chief for a priest, the wild Romany chant for a hymn of gladness, the shrouding darkness of the mountain-side for a cathedral, and the much-feared and much-hated Miridoff for a bridegroom! Some thought of the incongruity of it all penetrated to Olga's mind through the deep fear that had taken hold of her. As the concluding bars of the gipsy ritual rose from around her, she snatched her hand from the grasp of Miridoff and tightly clasped her ears to shut out the sound. A sob escaped her. Her weakness was but momentary. Quickly marshalling her forces of resolution, the princess dropped into the withered hand of the chief the ring which would ensure her father's safety and for which she had sold herself into life-long bondage. The chief transferred it to a husky young gipsy and spoke a few words of instruction.

"Tell him to hasten," pleaded Olga. "He must not fail to carry the pledge to its destination within the specified time! Tell him that riches shall be his, untold riches, if he carries out his mission. I promise it."

Turning to Miridoff who was standing by silently and, truth to tell, a little awkwardly, she urged upon him the necessity for haste on the part of the messenger. "I have paid your price," she reminded him.

Miridoff bowed; but did not speak. Taking her by the arm he led her from the Hawk's Rest, and out along the narrow path by which she had come from the hunting lodge. Where the path narrowed so that single file became necessary, he dropped to the rear and they walked on in silence for a spell of perhaps ten minutes.

Olga felt unutterably weary. Mental anguish had drawn heavily on her strength, and the excitement of the day had brought her to the verge of a collapse. As they reached the turn of the broad trail that led up to the lodge, the small remnant of her strength that was left deserted her. She stopped, stretched out one hand for support, and then fell back in a faint.

Olga came back to life with a strange sense of security and comfort. Her head rested on a broad, comfortable shoulder. Two arms encompassed her. She was being carried up the steep, winding trail with an ease that bespoke unusual strength in her bearer. Too weak to move, too faint even for curiosity, she lay inertly in his arms. She realised dimly where they were when at last they entered the lodge, and it was with a faint regret that she felt herself lowered—so carefully and tenderly—to a couch.

Deft hands placed and adjusted cushions; there was a sound of much hurrying to and fro, and several voices close at hand. Out of the jumble of sounds that registered partially on her slowly reviving senses, came a new voice, sharp and incisive, which said: "Hands up!" Followed a pause and then a laugh, hearty and spontaneous but restrained, out of deference, she dimly realised, for her condition. Then a voice came out of the mists that was very familiar—and also very dear. There was more talk, more laughing, and then full consciousness came back to her with a shock! Words had distinctly reached her out of the indistinct babel of sounds, three words that electrified her, sending her heart beating wildly. "Miridoff is dead," someone had said.

Olga would have spoken, but found that weakness and excitement had combined to render her powerless either to move or speak. She heard the familiar and dear voice—and now she realised why it was dear, and just how dear it was—this time speaking from very close at hand. "Hand me the cordial, Crane," it said. Then an arm was slipped under her shoulders, and she was raised slightly from her recumbent position while a spoon was inserted between her lips. The cordial revived her wonderfully, but she did not open her eyes. Perhaps it was because she found the pressure of that strong arm so comforting.

"Hold on, Fenton," said the sharp and incisive voice. "Aren't you kind of making that business of supporting the invalid a bit too realistic? You act more like a lover than a nurse!"

And then came the astounding reply: "Hang it, Crane, can't I hug my own wife?"

CHAPTER XX

THE PLOT DISCOVERED

Olga slowly sat up. The room, she realised, was now empty save for the man who knelt beside her couch; a man in a long military cloak, that belonged, she knew, or had belonged, to her arch-enemy, now her husband. But the man wearing the cloak was not old, dark, and heavily whiskered. On the contrary, he was young, fair, and without a hair on his face. Donald Fenton sat on the floor beside her, in Miridoff's cloak, and he it had been who had said, "Miridoff is dead!"

Olga gazed at him in bewilderment.

"The duke, where is he?" she questioned faintly.

"He is not here," said Fenton. There was something strangely thrilling about this handsome young alien kneeling before her. It was perhaps the rapt way in which he was regarding her; almost as though he thought she belonged to him. His eyes were full of some secret that he wanted to share with her, a secret that already she intuitively seemed to understand.

"Have I been dreaming?" she asked. "Did I really go to-night to that place where all those dreadful people were, or was it just a dream?"

"You were really there," replied Fenton. His tone was quite calm, but that secret was burning in his eyes.

"Then where is the Grand Duke? And my father—will he——"

"His highness will be quite safe," Fenton assured her. "But as for Miridoff, he is dead!"

His hand reached out and took possession of hers. It was quite respectfully done, as though he sought to convey sympathy, assurance. She made no effort to withdraw her hand.

In a few words he told her of the meeting with Miridoff, of the struggle on the cliff side, and of the ending, when the Grand Duke, losing his balance on the edge, fell backward and down into the abyss.

"By a direct dispensation of Providence, his hat and cloak were left," he went on. "I realised that if his highness, your father, were to be saved, it was necessary for the wedding to go on. So I donned the cloak, hat and mask, and took Miridoff's place."

There was a tense silence. The girl covered her face, scarlet with confusion and a strange new emotion, in her hands. Fenton struggled to his feet and gazed down at her for a moment with the most wonderful tenderness in his eyes and a sad smile of renunciation on his lips. Then he started to pace the room, quickly, fitfully, nervously, a stern mental struggle showing in his face. Finally he stopped in front of her and said, slowly and quietly:

"A wedding over the tongs is considered binding. We are married in the eyes of the law, perhaps even in the eyes of the church. But it can quite easily be set aside. I knew that, of course. I was quite prepared to step aside—so you must not let this worry you!"

The girl raised her head and gazed at him intently for a moment. Then she stood up and faced him.

"Do you want the marriage set aside?" she asked.

A dull flush spread over Fenton's face. He made as though to clasp her in his arms, then checked himself with an effort at repression, only to yield again to the impulse. She felt herself drawn towards him.

"Olga, I dare not answer you!" he cried. "I meant to be firm, but I can only remember that for a time at least you are my wife!" He rained kisses on her face and hair and neck. It was a full minute before she succeeded in drawing herself away—and then it was only to arm's length.

Fenton had expected a storm of indignant protest. He saw instead a tremulous smile, a radiant flush, and eyes that were filled to overflowing with happiness. And he heard her say:

"If there is any question as to the legality of the marriage, had you not better find a priest?"

* * * * *

Fenton's arrival at the lodge, with the princess in his arms, had created a sensation, to say the least. It was not until he had removed his mask at Crane's strident command, that his real identity was discovered. When it developed that the Canadian and Olga were actually married, Crane retired to the operator's room above in a state of thorough mental mystification. He tramped in heavily and sat himself down in his chair, quite ignoring Mademoiselle Petrowa who was seated at the other side of the table; which was Crane's usual way with women.

The dancer and Crane had been thrown together continuously since the arrival of the rescuing party at the lodge. Anna had made certain tentative advances of a mildly flirtatious character, and Crane had responded by bullying her most ferociously; which, after all, is not so far removed from love-making. Strangely enough, Anna had not really understood his attitude. She was puzzled by this stormy, red-haired individual, who ordered her about as though she were a stage-hand. She had acknowledged to herself that he was an interesting type of man, a compelling type. When he had smiled—he had a most engaging smile—she had felt strangely attracted.

He coolly removed his coat and collar and rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows. Then he produced a pipe that he had found somewhere in the lodge, a most vile one, too, and settled down for a comfortable smoke. Through the haze that surrounded him he nodded frowningly at his companion.

"Pretty business, downstairs," he said, in an aggrieved tone. "Here's this fellow, Fenton, who knows the work we've got ahead of us and yet goes and wastes time getting married."

"Married!" cried Anna, in genuine amazement.

"Married," responded Crane with confirmatory disgust. "It seems he chucked Miridoff off the cliff and then took his place at the ceremony. The happy couple are downstairs now."

There was a period of silence. Anna had been well aware of the state of affairs between Fenton and Olga, but its sudden *denouement* almost took her breath away. Crane studied her shrewdly out of the corner of his eye.

"Just the same I admire the beggar's nerve!" he said finally. "He'll be putting ideas in other heads. Now if an ordinary fellow like Fenton can pick up with a princess, perhaps even a down-at-heels engineer could aspire to—er——"

Anna laughed, a rippling laugh that expressed enlightenment and much satisfaction. She had seen beneath the armour of bluster, and knew that in reality Crane would be as wax in her facile hands. From that moment dated the ascendancy of Anna.

Crane frowned with offended dignity, but Anna continued to laugh and to regard him in a way that said, plainer than words, "At last I have found you out." Crane's frown was like a threat from the commandant of the citadel after he has hauled down his flag and surrendered the keys. Perceiving something of this, Crane turned hastily to the wireless, glad of an interruption provided by a faint click that gave notice of an arriving message.

For a moment he regarded the keys with casual interest, then the expression of his face changed to one of surprise, concern, and finally to almost incredulous delight. For ten minutes he alternately received and sent replies, feverish interest showing in every line of him. What the news could be, flashing back and forth across space, to cause such concern, his companion could not conceive. She watched him with keen expectancy.

Completing the sending of a final message, Crane suddenly sprang up from the instrument. Dragging her from her chair, he waltzed her round the room hilariously, winding up the performance by lifting her bodily to a seat on the table. Standing before her he declaimed excitedly: "You've witnessed the making of history, girl! A most stupendous piece of luck has come our way. I've blundered on to the

means to bring Ironia into line. To-morrow we'll be at war with Austria!" And he danced up and down the room, his red face redder than ever.

The first flush of his excitement over, he picked up his pipe again and began to pull at it furiously.

"Pardon the exuberance," he said. "I felt so pleased with myself and everything in general that I simply had to do something. You see I've got an idea, a scheme that's going to take some working out. It's a big idea, too. Didn't know I had it in me. But, look here, I can't leave the room for fear the operator over the line there in Austria takes it into his head to let out some more state secrets. Now run down and order Fenton to come up here—there's a good girl."

When Anna had gone, Crane did some hard thinking. He had the faculty of quick calculation. It had instantly occurred to him how the message he had waylaid might be turned to good account, and, in a dim way too, he gained a superficial understanding of the details necessary for the success of his scheme. Swiftly he turned and touched the keys. In a few moments he was in touch with the Austrian station from which the first message had come. So intent was he on the business in hand that he paid no attention when the others entered the room.

"Where exactly is the Ironian regiment ready to join yours?" This was the question he sent. In a moment he got his answer; and, having assured the officer with whom he was in communication that his earlier request should be attended to, he turned and nodded to Fenton.

"Fenton," he said, "I've just received a message that reveals the whole of Miridoff's plan. It came from Austrian headquarters ten miles across the line. An hour ago, in accordance with a pre-arranged plan, a thousand Austrian troops moved out of camp in the direction of the Russian frontier. The plan, as I understand it now, is this."

He grasped a piece of paper and roughly sketched a map of the district. "Here's our present position approximately," he explained. "We're about three miles from the frontier. Now here's the Bhura River, which serves as the dividing line between the two countries. Five miles up the river, a small tributary branches off from the Bhura into Ironian territory, but if you cross the Bhura just above the point where the tributary stream starts you find yourself in Russia; and the tributary itself flows between Russia and Ironia. An Ironian regiment, which has been stationed on the frontier, is now camped close to the junction point.

"The plan is simplicity itself. The Austrians march until they reach this junction of the two streams. Then they signal to the Ironians, who are officered by men in Miridoff's pay. A joint raid across the river into Russian territory follows, with the burning of a village or two. The Russian troops will soon drive the raiders back, of course, but the mischief will be done. Ironia will have committed an open act of war against Russia."

"A diabolically clever scheme," exclaimed Fenton. "Not even the death of Miridoff can stop it. Certainly we can do nothing now."

"Can't we?" cried Crane triumphantly. "By the roaring bull of Bashan, we can stop it! I have a plan that will just reverse things completely. Look at this map again! Two miles west of the first tributary there is another stream branching off the Bhura in the same direction as that higher up the river. If the Austrians in the darkness were to mistake this stream for the one higher up they would cross the Bhura there and so get into Ironian territory instead of Russian! Now, just supposing that they made this mistake, they would run right into an Ironian hamlet consisting of a church and a dozen houses or so. In accordance with instructions they would proceed to set fire to this, with the idea that it was a Russian village. Ironians, conveniently stationed there for the purpose—under our friend Larescu—would promptly attack the invaders and drive them back across the river. The same result follows as is expected if the plan of Miridoff is carried out, except that the position of the countries will be reversed. Austria will have committed an open act of war against Ironia. It will act like a spark on dry tinder. Ironia will blaze up and war will follow immediately!"

"That is all very plausible," said Fenton, "but the possibility of the Austrians crossing at the wrong stream is negligible. Their plans will be too carefully laid for any miscarriage."

"They will cross at the wrong place!" declared Crane triumphantly. "The wireless message that first came through was from the officer in command of the Austrians. He's new to this part of the country, and, as the Bhura is starting to flood, he wanted Miridoff to send someone over to guide him to the best junction-point with the Ironian troops. I wired back that one Neviloff was leaving at once for the purpose. Well, what with the darkness of the night, the floods and the similarity of the two streams, Neviloff will see that they get over the wrong one."

"Neviloff?" The question came from Fenton and Anna simultaneously.

"Exactly. You see, it occurred to me that Miridoff would have been most likely to send a man he could rely on for a mission of this kind, and the name is probably familiar to the Austrians."

"Do you mean that you intend to go yourself?" asked Fenton in surprise.

Crane nodded. "I speak both German and Ironian, and there ought to be a suitable uniform around this place somewhere. Well, I ride over to Tisza," he indicated a point on the map just across the border, "and report to the Austrian commander there. Luckily I've been all along the Bhura on a surveying trip. What would be easier on such a night than to make a mistake and bring them over the river too soon—over into Ironia, where the tribesmen of Take Larescu will be waiting to provide a suitable welcome? The plan can't go wrong."

"You propose to decide the fate of Ironia on a gambler's throw," said Fenton. "It's a wonderful scheme, Crane. But, man, do you realise what it would mean to you? You take your life in your hands. If they find you out they'll shoot you on the spot. It will be a Hungarian troop sent for this work, and the Magyars are a vindictive lot. But even if you escape detection at first they would certainly suspect when they discovered they had been led astray."

"No danger at all," said the Englishman easily. "I've got it all figured out, and there's not one chance in a hundred of failure. When the fighting starts, I slip away easily enough. Now, Fenton, you get started on your part of the undertaking, which is to have Larescu on hand with a couple of thousand of his men to drive the Austrians back. We'll have to take a chance on the Ironian troops not moving out. I don't think they will. In all probability Miridoff intended to ride over there and direct things himself. Not hearing from him, they will wait for further orders."

Fenton grasped Crane's hand warmly.

"Phil, it is worth trying," he said. "If it succeeds, the credit for deciding the final outcome of the Great War may belong to you. I wish I could go with you."

"When Mr Crane returns I shall tell him how wonderful it is I think him to be," said Anna, shaking his hand in turn.

"I'm coming back right enough," replied Crane, with a steady regard, and retaining her hand the while. "And when I do, I shall have something myself to say to you."

Half an hour later, warmly cloaked, and booted and spurred, Crane rode down the mountain-side toward the Bhura River. Looking back he could see a beacon light burning brightly on one of the highest peaks, and he knew that Larescu was gathering his band for the night's work.

CHAPTER XXI

PLANNING A FUTURE

As the hours passed the hill country awoke to restless activity. On several prominent peaks the beacon fires blazed, summoning the followers of Take Larescu. From all sides they began to troop in, silent, grotesque, armed to the teeth. The glen, along the ridge of which Fenton had carried his bride earlier that night, was soon crowded with the hill men. By midnight more than a thousand had assembled, and from all directions they were still coming at the urgent summons of the flaring beacons.

Take Larescu took charge of the situation and skilfully wrought order out of chaos. He organised his followers into detachments, and to each allotted positions along the stretch of foot-hills where the Austrians would be awaited. On receiving their instructions from the gigantic master of ceremonies, the detachments moved off into the enshrouding darkness as silently as they had come. The oddly garbed figures coming and going in the flickering light of torches, the war-like gestures, made the whole proceedings seem a phantasm of the imagination, a wild, strange dream.

Fenton, wearing the military cloak of Miridoff, watched proceedings from a vantage point in the rear. He had early found that Take Larescu was master of the situation, and had discreetly withdrawn into the background. Larescu had fought through several campaigns, and had gained a reputation as the Napoleon of mountain warfare. He could be counted upon to give the Austrians a warm reception.

A light touch on the Canadian's arm caused him to turn. Olga had come quietly behind him. She was muffled snugly and warmly in a heavy cloak with a hood, so that Fenton could discern little else but a pair of glowing eyes.

"We have much to talk about, my lord," she said happily, placing an arm through his. "Could you not give me a few minutes now?"

"I am at your service for eternity," he replied. "There is nothing for me to do here in any case. Larescu has taken everything into his own hands."

The night air was cold. Fenton guided his wife up a steep and rocky path that led to the foot of the beacon light, in which the fire was now dying down. At the foot was a smooth rock of some size, and here they seated themselves. Fenton's arm found its way protectingly around the slender form of his princess-bride, and the lovely hooded head nestled back against his shoulder.

"I have won you after all!" exclaimed the Canadian exultingly. "It is hard to realise that you are really my wife—and yet I felt right from the first that nothing could keep us apart. We were intended for each other, even if half the globe did separate us."

"One can see the hand of Fate in it all," whispered Olga. "I think it must have all been planned by One Who is mightier than we are. For you see I had made up my mind to give you up. Nothing could have induced me to marry you, dear, of my own free will."

"Olga!" cried Fenton indignantly. "Then you don't love me after all? If you really loved me, nothing could have kept you from me in the end."

"Yes, dear boy, I loved you—from the first, I think," she replied, looking up.

Seating directly beneath the beacon, they were partly in the shade, and Fenton could not see her very clearly, but he discerned enough of the loving message in her eyes to bring about an extended interruption of the conversation.

"That will do, Donald," she said finally. Then she laughed—the happy, light laugh of one who loves and is loved, which begins without cause and ends as suddenly as it begins. "It is the first time I have said your funny name, husband mine. Did I say it right?"

"I hope I never hear anyone else uttering the name," said Fenton ecstatically. "After hearing it on your lips it would seem profanation from any other source."

"It is rather a nice name, although it seemed so strange at first," she said judiciously, as she repeated it over several times almost in a whisper. "I used to wonder if I could ever come to call you that."

"Now you've given yourself away," cried Fenton triumphantly. "If you wondered that, you couldn't have made up your mind that you would give me up."

"I have indulged much in day dreams since I met you, dear," she said, "but—it would have made no difference. My father would never have consented to my marrying you, not even if you had saved his life many times and had been a thousand times too good for an ignorant little Ironian princess—as you are. And I would never have disobeyed him. You do not understand us, my own. We Ironians are bound by custom, by traditions of which you have no conception in your free country. It would have broken my heart, but—I would have remained Princess Olga all my life."

Fenton was silent, pondering this thought, terrifying to him even in negative perspective.

"But I am now quite free in my conscience," she went on. "I thought to save my father's life by marrying the man I feared, and the good Father of all gave me instead the man I loved. It must have been His will that I should come to you. And so I look forward to the future before us with no misgivings, dark though it may be at times. And I am so happy."

There was another and longer interruption. The suggestion of future troubles contained in her words was welcome to Fenton, for it promised an opportunity to protect her, to assert his right and power to shield her. His arm about her tightened almost fiercely.

"I begin to see that after all I owe a lot to Miridoff," he said.

"You will have to take me away from Ironia," said Olga, a little out of breath from the ardour of her husband's embrace. "I could never go back to court. My father will refuse to forgive me at first, and will perhaps talk of having our marriage set aside. But in time he will perhaps learn to forgive his wayward girl." She paused for a moment.

"You see what you have done," she went on with a gaiety that did not entirely mask the strain of sadness beneath. "Tell me, my lord and master, what you are going to do with me now? I begin a new life with you."

"The future will be in your hands as much as in mine," replied Fenton. "When the war is over we shall travel all over the world. Then will come the question of settling down, of building a permanent nest. I hope when the time comes you will have found no place more to your liking than my own country."

"I would go anywhere with you," she said confidently. "I have made up my mind on one thing, never to let you out of my sight. If you go where the fighting is to-night I go too."

"That you do not," said Fenton, laughing with cool masculine assumption. "Darling, I am going to take you back at once to the lodge, and you must go right to bed and to sleep. You need rest. And in the morning I shall bring you news of the repulse of the invaders."

"No," said Olga determinedly, "I could not sleep. I must go with you. There will be no danger. There are many women down there in the glen. And, see—I came prepared. I shall be quite safe with you in this costume."

She threw back her cloak and stood revealed in the dress of a woman of the hills. She made a pretty gipsy figure in her bright-coloured garb. Fenton took her face in both his hands and shook his head at her adoringly, submissively.

"You shall have your own way," he said, "in this and, I am afraid, in most things. I begin to realise how well fitted you are for the new world, where women have found the way to get everything they want."

They returned slowly to the glen below, and Larescu greeted Fenton with a roar of exultation.

"They come!" he cried. "One of my men has brought the word. The Austrians are crossing the river!"

CHAPTER XXII

IRONIA INVADED

The Austrian cavalry regiment, which had ridden out of Tisza shortly before midnight, with Crane in the van, struck the Bhura River a mile below the point where the first tributary branched off. The night was so dark that it was impossible to see very far ahead even with the assistance of the torches that a few of the troopers had attached to the ends of their lances. The roads were so muddy that but slow progress was made. Evidences of the floods farther up the river had already been encountered at points where the road ran close to the river banks.

Crane reined in his horse and turned to the officer who rode beside him.

"A small stream runs south from the Bhura a mile ahead and it is there we should cross," he said in German, "but I am doubtful if it will be possible to get over. See, the water is rising higher all the time. There is a bridge not a hundred yards ahead of us—unless the rising water has already swept it away. I propose that we cross there. It may be impossible higher up."

"It is well advised what you suggest," replied the officer. "I am worried, however, about the possibilities of the return trip. Suppose the floods rise so rapidly that it will be impossible to recross the river? We should be trapped on Russian soil!"

Crane shrugged his shoulders.

"Our orders cover only the advance," he said. "After we have carried out that which has been entrusted to us—the return is strictly our business. For the mission on which we are bound, it might be better if none of us returned. Austrian and Ironian troops massacred on Russian soil would surely bring about war."

"I don't fear to die," said the officer. "But I would prefer to fall in open battle and not in an obscure border affray. But, as you say, we have our orders to follow. Nothing else need count. God! it is dark! A horrible night for our purpose, Neviloff!"

"An admirable night," said Crane. "We can carry out our raid under the cover of this darkness and get safely back across the border without loss. If the floods let us, that is."

"Hein! we are into the water now," ejaculated the officer, reining in his horse.

"The road is low here and the water has come up over it," said Crane, peering intently ahead. "But the gods are with us. I can see the bridge ahead; it is still holding. We had better get across while we may."

The troop clattered across the bridge at a smart gallop and turned up a road on the Ironian side of the Bhura which was still quite dry. Ten minutes brought them to the first stream. It was swollen with the rising water, but, being only a narrow creek, was still fordable.

"Across there is Russia," said Crane, pointing over the stream. "My troops are crossing some miles below and will join us near the first village. We must lose no time. Every minute now lessens our chances of getting back over the Bhura alive."

"It's strange," said the officer. "I didn't think we were so close to the Russian frontier. Are there not two streams branching south from the Bhura?"

"Yes," replied Crane hastily, "there is another stream behind us. We passed it some time before we reached the flooded section."

Orders were passed along the line of troops and the work of crossing the turgid stream began. The horses balked at the brink and had to be beaten and spurred into the swirling flood; so that the passage of the regiment was a noisy one with much shouting and cursing and snapping of whips.

On the other side the troops formed up and followed Crane along a narrow lane that led back on a slowly ascending scale toward the foot-hills.

Almost before they knew it, the regiment had ridden into a small hamlet. Darkened houses lined each side of the road, and just ahead of them loomed the spire of a church. The noise of the galloping horses aroused no signs of life, and this made Crane feel certain that they had reached the appointed place. It had been arranged that Larescu was to warn the villagers to make good their escape.

The troops set about their work with eagerness, even with noisy gusto. They broke in doors and windows and set fire to the houses. Soon one end of the village was in flames, and in the bright light that suffused the whole, the fact that the village was deserted became apparent.

The officer in command, plainly uneasy, rode up to Crane, who had kept in the van with his eyes open for a chance to make good his escape. The Austrian was clearly suspicious.

"Not a soul in the place," he said. "Why not? Someone carried word of our plans ahead of us; that must be it. What's this?"

The rattle of musketry broke out ahead of them. Some of the men, getting in advance of the line, had been fired on from the bush in which the long, single street of the village terminated. As if by magic, though no one knew whence it came, the word passed down the ranks: "Ironian troops are firing on us." And, as a natural corollary, the most discerning saw and voiced what had happened.

"We have burned an Ironian village," said the officer who rode by Crane.

The latter sensed trouble.

"No you don't," came sharply from the Austrian, as Crane put spurs into his horse.

But the Englishman was putting yards and more yards between him and the officer. He did not hesitate now. He knew that his safety depended upon his ability to get away at once. Kicking the steel into his horse's flanks, he started into a wild gallop. Guttural but loud shouts behind him warned him of impending retribution—if they could shoot straight. Instinctively he dropped flat over his horse's neck. Shots rang out and one bullet ploughed through his hair, touching and grazing his forehead in its passage. The blood trickled down over his brow and filtered over his eyes. He brushed it away and found he had not been badly hurt. But a moment later another shot apparently hit his horse, for the animal screamed, stumbled, and lunged forward on its knees.

Crane hurtled over its head and came down with a thud on the rough muddy road.

CHAPTER XXIII CRANE'S ESCAPE

When Crane returned to consciousness he found himself lying in a cramped and painful position on a rough clay surface.

He fell into a violent fit of coughing. The atmosphere about him was smoke-charged and stiflingly close and hot. A steady, crackling sound above gradually impressed itself upon his groping mind with startling import. He was lying under the shelter of a burning building.

After many futile attempts, Crane managed to struggle into a sitting position. The light from the burning roof provided sufficient illumination to enable him to see that the hamlet was deserted and given over to the ravages of the fire which had gained such headway that to remain longer where he was would be fatal. The wall above him might crumble in at any time. Breathing had become difficult and painful. The smoke that filled his lungs shook him with rasping, suffocating spells of coughing. Dimly he heard sounds of receding conflict beyond the village.

Crane struggled to his feet and lurched weakly forward, blinded with the smoke. Next moment, overcome with the intense heat, he fainted dead away.

It was some time after that Crane again regained consciousness. This time he was lying on the ground, his head reclining comfortably on a pillow made of some folded garment. A water-soaked bandage encircled his brow, giving inexpressible relief. He attempted to pull himself together and sit up, but desisted from the effort with an involuntary groan.

"Hello, here's old Crane coming around after all," said the voice of Fenton, somewhere close at hand.

"Right as rain in a minute," said Crane weakly. Then, after a pause, "Where am I?"

"Don't know exactly myself," said Fenton. "We got you out of the burning village just in the nick of time and carried you back into the woods here. How are you feeling now?"

"A little brandy would make a new man of me. Any handy?"

A flask, containing some raw, red-hot Ironian equivalent, was produced and a liberal measure poured down his throat. Crane coughed, spluttered and finally sat up, little the worse for wear, but still weak and decidedly giddy in the head.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Everything went off as per schedule," said Fenton. "The Austrians started to set fire to the village, and then Larescu and his men opened fire on them. The invaders put up a short fight and retired with more precipitancy than order. Last I saw of it, they were headed for the river with the hill men in hot pursuit. If the river has continued to rise, the Austrians will have some difficulty in getting back to their own side. I didn't join in the chase as I was getting anxious about you. Luckily, Mademoiselle Petrova found you and managed to drag you out of the road just before the front of a burning hut collapsed on you."

"Mademoiselle Petrowa! Now what, on the word of a bald-headed friar, was she doing there?" exclaimed Crane.

A soft voice, proceeding from some point close behind him, spoke up.

"It is indeed the great pleasure that Mistaire Crane has recovered. One judges from his choice of words that he is feeling much the better."

"I have a double duty to perform then—to thank you for saving my life and to lecture you for your folly in being where you could do it," said Crane, with a return of his habitual manner.

"My good friend, the brave Mistaire Crane will please forget the thanks and save the lectures until he is stronger," insisted Anna. "If I have been foolish, it has been in the best company. Her highness was helping in the search for you."

"Yes, they both insisted on coming along," put in Fenton. "I had the greatest difficulty in keeping them off the firing-line. If all the women of Ironia are as fiery as the pair I've had on my hands to-night, I shall feel the deepest compassion for any army that attempts the invasion of the country!"

"I'll never forgive myself for this night's work," said Crane dejectedly. "I bungled things badly in not getting away in time. Then Mademoiselle has to risk her very valuable life to save my very worthless one——"

It was still dark. A soft hand from somewhere was slipped confidingly into his. Crane did not finish the sentence.

A moment later a gipsy-clad girl, who had been sitting silently by during the dialogue, rose unobtrusively and led Fenton away.

"I am glad," whispered the princess. "I don't mind confessing now that I have been very jealous of your Mademoiselle Petrowa."

* * * * *

With the first light of dawn came Take Larescu, an unsheathed sword in his hand. The gigantic leader of the hill men was mud-stained and dishevelled, but thoroughly well pleased with himself.

"Not an Austrian remains on the sacred soil of our Ironia," he declared, mopping his brow with a bright silk handkerchief, drawn from his belt, "except a hundred or so who will never go back. And more good news for you, my young friend. A party of my men have burned Kirkalisse to the ground. Everything comes to him who strikes while the iron is hot."

For a moment Fenton said nothing. Then: "Kirkalisse burnt. Miridoff dead. Austrian invasion of Ironian soil. Ironian rout of the Austrians. This is news. It must be got to Serajoz, and that at once."

"As to the raid of the Austrians," replied the brigand chief, "I have already arranged that part of it. Messengers have been sent east, west and south. All Ironia will know within the next twenty-four hours that our country has been invaded, and that means——"

"That war is certain," Fenton finished the sentence spiritedly.

Neither spoke for a second. Then the hill leader drew Fenton closer and whispered to him: "We captured several of Miridoff's men at Kirkalisse."

"Yes. What did you find out?"

"They told us all they knew. One of them was the young gipsy who had been sent with a token—the princess's ring, was it not?—which, as I was able to understand it, was to stop a proposed assassination of Prince Peter. But he had not been able to find his man, to warn him."

Fenton started. In a moment he visualised all that this item of news meant. Was, then, Miridoff's death of no avail?

"Do you mean, then," he asked, "that the assassin has done his work?"

"No. Prince Peter, it appears, changed his plans and returned to Serajoz by another route."

"Thank God! Then everything will be all right."

"I don't know," said Larescu, shaking his shaggy head. "The assassin has followed him on the road. But I think the prince had start enough, from what I hear, to get to Serajoz a good few hours before the assassin could come up with him. Nevertheless, someone should go to the capital immediately."

"Yes, you are right," broke in the Canadian. "I shall go myself. Find me a guide back through the mountains."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NEW KING

King Alexander of Ironia stood in an embrasure of the royal council room. He appeared to be gazing over the crowded, turbulent Lodz, but in reality he saw nothing; nor did the wild clamour that rose from the mob-ridden square in front of the palace reach his ears. The King stared into space while angry emotions ran riot in his mind. Adamant determination, black anger and futile longing for strength to combat his aroused subjects, filled the brain of the baffled monarch. A truly royal figure he appeared, standing there alone by the window—arms folded on his breast, mouth set in ominous lines, staring out into space as silent and as motionless as bronze.

Back in the council room a number of men were seated around a long table, conversing in low tones and furtively regarding the solitary figure of the monarch.

"His Majesty will never give in," said Danilo Vanilis, the shrewdest and strongest of the King's councillors. "I know him. He has sworn not to fight Potsdam—and he will die rather than break his pledge."

"But he can't resist longer," interjected another. "The Austrian invasion has stirred the country up from one end to the other. The army clamours for war. Officers, who have been known to favour the Austrian cause, have been forcibly ejected. There is not a man left in Ironia to back the King. He must give in."

"Look at him," said Vanilis. "There he stands, like a lion at bay; see the poise of his head, the set of the lips, the brooding light in the eyes. Alexander would stand fast if the whole world took sides against him; he would fight single-handed against the hosts of the Archangel. It is as pitiable as it is strange that such determination, such grand devotion, should have found its vent only in upholding a tradition!"

"Still more strange that the Austrians should have committed this open act of war," whispered a third. "It was rumoured that Miridoff had a carefully concocted scheme that would inevitably result in plunging us into war with the Russians. Then, like a bolt from the blue, comes this mad exploit of the Austrians. And, strangest of all, Miridoff himself has disappeared."

"It can only be understood when it is explained that it occurred in the mountains," said a fourth. "Anything can happen there. Take Larescu led the force which drove the Austrians back over the Bhura. Mark my word, Larescu is at the bottom of this. And, what is more, I am convinced that Miridoff has been killed."

"And not too soon!" A murmured chorus of assent ran around the board. Vanilis, after a pause, went on, speaking in a low tone: "It is strange that Peter has not returned. He was to have been with us. You all heard the rumour that an attempt would be made to assassinate him on his way back. It cannot be that——"

He paused. There was no need to finish the sentence, for the faces of all the company advertised the fact that the same fear had entered the mind of each man there. It was a disquieting thought; for all men recognised now that the strong hand of Prince Peter was needed at the helm.

"Gentlemen!"

The King had faced about. Slowly, with white, set face and dignified stride, His Majesty walked back to the head of the table. He glanced coldly about the board.

"You have demanded that we sign this monstrous paper," he said, his voice hard. "An ungrateful country clamours for war. Our word has been pledged that Ironia shall not join in the war against the German empires. That word must stand. Sirs, we refuse absolutely to sign this iniquitous declaration!"

"Recollect what this refusal means, sire," urged Vanilis. "The army is determined. Even the household guards have joined in the clamour. Sire, your life might even be placed in jeopardy?"

"Our life is of no value beside our honour," said Alexander, with dignified scorn. He reached into the breast of his uniform and drew out a document, which he threw, almost contemptuously, on the table before him. "There is our answer. The hand of Alexander will never sign the order that declares this war. But, sirs, if on war you are bent, war you shall have. We gladly lay down the distasteful task of ruling a nation of ingrates."

The men round the table sat silent. But each of them knew that the paper was the King's abdication!

As he turned the sound of sudden tumultuous cheering came up to them from the streets below. It was almost as though the news of the stubborn King's dramatic exit had been translated by some speedy telepathy to the eager crowds without. Alexander frowned bitterly and turned back to the silent company about the council table.

"They cheer now," he said grimly. "What will they do after your mad determination and their lust has flooded the country in blood—and German Uhlans ride down the Lodz? Sirs, I have warned you. The ruin of Ironia be on your heads!"

"We do not fear that!" cried Vanilis. "We fight for the provinces that were stolen from us, and God will be with us."

Alexander did not reply. He walked slowly from the room, head held proudly high, one hand clenched across his breast, the other pressed tightly on his sword hilt.

"The King is dead," uttered one of the men, almost with awe. "Long live the——"

"Long live King Peter!" cried another, with enthusiasm.

For a door at the other end of the hall had opened to admit the prince. His sudden arrival was the cause, obviously, of the clamour that had broken out in the square below. Prince Peter was flushed with rapid riding and spattered with mud. It was clear that he had ridden far and fast to attend this momentous conference.

"Gentlemen, it is war!" he cried, with high enthusiasm. "The country through which I have come is literally ablaze. Nothing can hold us back now. Austria has struck the first blow. And I bring you news. The Russian armies move on Mulkovina to-morrow. Ironia must declare herself to-day."

Danilo Vanilis, sitting at the end of the table, rose and held a paper out toward him.

"All that is needed is the signature of His Majesty the King. Sign, sire!"

Peter gazed at the other for a moment, growing wonderment on his face. Then he glanced quickly around the crowded board.

"Alexander abdicated five minutes ago. King Peter now rules in Ironia," announced Vanilis with a low bow.

Peter was a man of quick comprehension and decision. He grasped the pen.

"That king is fortunate," he declared, "whose first duty is to fight a cause so dear to the hearts of the people over whom he has been called to rule! To-night, sirs, we leave for the front!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE ASSASSINATION

Events moved fast in Ironia. At five o'clock Peter was publicly declared King, the announcement being received with manifestations of the wildest joy in Serajoz. At five-thirty an official statement of Ironia's intentions was communicated to the Ambassadors of Austria, Germany and Turkey, and their passports were handed to them. At six o'clock the first regiment marched out of the capital for the front, through streets lined with deliriously happy multitudes.

The work of mobilisation was begun in feverish haste. King Peter spent three hours directing the efforts of the general staff and in conference with the leading bankers. As he worked, however, the new monarch never for a moment lost sight of the grim spectre that had haunted him for two days. Varden had brought him word of the abduction of Olga just as he was preparing for his trip to the frontier. Since then he had heard no news of her.

A Spartan in everything else, Peter had been the most loving and indulgent of fathers. Olga, left an orphan when less than a year old, had soon gained complete possession of her father's heart. He had pampered and petted her in quite as complete a degree as any fond parent that ever ruined a child in sheer blindness of affection; but Olga, having one of those rare natures that cannot be spoiled, even by parental indulgence, had developed greater stores of sweetness and grace in the strong light of her father's love. It can be surmised, therefore, that when the news of the abduction of the princess had reached him he had been thrown into a ferment of fear; but, knowing how much the welfare of Ironia depended upon him, Peter had delayed his departure only long enough to issue instructions for the pursuit of her abductors.

The news awaiting him on his return had been disquieting. No direct clue as to her whereabouts had been found, although there was plenty of evidence to show that the abduction had been the work of brigands from the hills. It was with a heavy heart, therefore, that Peter applied himself to the multitudinous duties devolving upon him with his sudden accession to the throne of Ironia on the eve of her entry into the war.

Outside the demonstration continued, growing in enthusiasm as hour succeeded hour. Military headquarters were besieged by men begging for an opportunity to enlist. A statue in the square before the royal palace, representing the lost provinces, was literally covered with flowers. The public streets were rendered quite impassable by the masses of exuberant citizens who loudly acclaimed the new King, and clamoured for a sight of him.

About the time that His Majesty rose from the desk to which he had been chained for three hours of unremitting activity, Fenton, weary and dust-laden, astride a foam-flecked horse, turned into the north end of the Lodz. On receiving the startling intelligence that the human instrument of Miridoff's foul purpose had followed Prince Peter to the capital, intent on carrying out his work, Fenton had at once secured a guide from Larescu and had negotiated a difficult short cut through the mountain country. Arriving at the base of the chain of hills in the early forenoon, he had procured a horse. An all-day gallop with one change of mount in the late afternoon, brought him to the city about nine o'clock, in a condition bordering on total collapse. Since his arrival in Ironia, Fenton had found little opportunity for sleep, and his exploits had been as varied as they were arduous. By sheer force of will only was he able to maintain his seat in the saddle.

The presence of dense crowds in the Lodz did not surprise him; all the way down from the hill country he had found increasing evidences of excitement which satisfied him that Crane's spectacular coup had finally brought Ironia into the war.

As the density of the crowd grew he was forced to abandon his mount and continue forward toward the palace of the prince on foot. It became very slow work, until finally Fenton's patience gave way. Fearing that every moment lost might cost the prince his life, Fenton broke recklessly through the crush which inevitably brought him into conflict in a crowd where the fighting spirit ran so high. As he crossed the square in front of the King's palace a much excited and picturesquely ragged man blocked his way determinedly. Fenton roughly elbowed him aside and received in reprisal a blow in the face. His assailant poured out a volume of abuse in French, which caused the Canadian to turn and regard him curiously. To his delight Fenton recognised his acquaintance of the Greek restaurant, Monsieur Francois Dubois.

"Dubois, by all that's holy!" he cried. "It's lucky I can claim a prior acquaintance, otherwise I fear you would be inclined to show me no mercy. You have plenty of strength left in that arm of yours, my friend."

"Monsieur Fenton," cried the Frenchman. "Ah, my young friend, forgive me. I have strength left, yes—strength to shoulder a rifle, monsieur. To-morrow I enlist for the service."

"I am just back from the hill country," said Fenton. "What is the news? Has war been declared yet?"

"War was declared by our good King Peter within an hour of his accession to the throne," cried the Frenchman.

"King Peter!" exclaimed Fenton, surveying Monsieur Dubois as though he feared the Frenchman had been suddenly bereft of his senses.

"It was just as I told you, monsieur. Alexander would not give in. When he found that war could no longer be staved off he abdicated, and Peter became King."

"Then I must lose no time," cried Fenton. "It is doubly important that I get to him at once. I have news of a plot against his life."

He plunged with reckless haste through the crowds, opening an avenue by sheer force, and thus enabling Monsieur Dubois to follow along in his wake without difficulty.

"Make way! In the name of the King!" cried the Frenchman in the native tongue. This caused the people in front to give way. Nevertheless the progress of the pair was intolerably slow.

There is an emotional strain in the Ironian which manifests itself in moments of stress and unusual excitement. When stirred by any deep emotion he will emit strange cries and break into high-pitched interminable chants. To the visitor this tendency is inexplicable, and it has contributed not a little to the feeling among other races that there is something uncanny about the men of the Balkan mountains. As Fenton piloted Monsieur Dubois through the square this monotonous chant arose from all sides, and, mingling with the shrill and warlike cries, created a literal pandemonium of sound.

As they neared the front of the palace there was a stir which indicated that something of importance was happening. As Fenton looked the windows opening on to a balcony to the right of the main entrance were thrown back and two officers stepped out. The noise ceased almost instantly, and a silence settled down over the square. Following the two officers came Peter, in uniform and bare-headed. He stepped to the front of the balcony, and, resting his hands on the top of the grotesquely ornamental iron railing, swept the crowded square and the streets beyond with a proud eye.

His appearance was the signal for an outbreak even more vociferous than before. Peter had always been popular with the people of Ironia, more popular than the haughty, unbending Alexander. His advocacy of the allied cause had cemented the affection of the populace, and now his prompt action following his accession to the throne raised him as a national hero even to the pinnacle of Alexander Sobiesku of revered memory.

The King raised his hand as a signal for silence, and again the noise died down to the uncertain rumble of a mob at rest. Fenton, wedged in firmly and unable to make any material progress either forward or back, had up to this point kept his gaze fixed on the stately figure of the King. Now his glance wandered to a burly fellow just ahead of him, a peasant from his garb. The man attracted Fenton's attention in some inexplicable way, and as the Canadian watched he perceived something which caused him to cry out in frantic tones of alarm.

"Men of Ironia," the King began in clear tones that carried each word distinctly to the farthest confines of the square. Then of a sudden came the sharp crack of a revolver shot, and Peter staggered back from the railing into the arms of the officers behind him.

The peasant had levelled a revolver over the shoulder of the man in front of him. Fenton, perceiving the move, had torn a path through the press toward the assassin. His hands had closed almost on the peasant's shoulder when the explosion broke the silence.

"Too late! My God, to have him within my reach and not stop him," groaned Fenton, stunned with the catastrophe that had occurred before his very eyes.

He reeled blindly in the rush of the enraged mob and was buffeted here and there. The gun-man had apparently been surrounded by accomplices and friends, for the vengeance-seeking mob was held back and hampered in its pursuit of the daring peasant. In the darkness and confusion the assassin disappeared, swallowed up in the agitated sea of humanity. Two days later he was given up and summarily shot; but, having no foreknowledge of this, the crowd, balked of their prey and frantic with anxiety for the wounded monarch, descended to depths of vengeful, berserk fury that could vent itself only in indiscriminate conflict. Friend fought friend, blows were struck with savage hate, blood flowed freely.

Fenton found himself propelled out of the now almost bestial crowd to a side street where comparative calm reigned. Monsieur Dubois, guessing how near to the point of total collapse his companion was, hurried Fenton to the nearest open shop and there procured a brimming beaker of strong liquor. After drinking the restorative Fenton felt a measure of his strength return.

"Another moment and Monsieur Fenton would have been under the feet of the mob," said the Frenchman. "They are wild for blood back there! Harken to their cries! If the King dies, not an Austrian will be left alive in this city by break of day."

"If he dies!" echoed Fenton in an agony of remorse. "To think that I arrived just too late. If he dies I shall feel as guilty as the wretch who fired the shot!"

"He cannot—he must not die!" cried Dubois. "Ironia needs the strong hand of her King now. God will not take him away when he has but placed his hand to the plough."

* * * * *

Back in the palace two physicians were bending over the prostrate figure of the wounded King with significant silence.

"He still lives," said one finally, "but——"

And the other nodded with grim acquiescence.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEATH OF THE KING

It was noon when Fenton awoke the next day. He awoke to a sense of unfamiliar surroundings. Above him was a ceiling of dingy, brownish hue. The walls, he discovered on investigation, were similar to the ceiling and unadorned save for a few dusty old French prints. The bed on which he lay was hard and lumpy, the coverlet ancient and thin. There was a faint mustiness observable in the atmosphere and through a half-closed door came the sound of a bow softly scraping the strings of a decrepit violin. Fenton sat bolt upright in bed and examined his surroundings with much surprise and, truth to tell, a little alarm.

The fact that he was awake was thus communicated to the musician in the other room; for a shuffling step crossed the floor and the head of Monsieur Dubois was poked inquiringly through the door.

"Now I understand," said Fenton, putting one leg out of the bed, and groaning with the effort—for a full day in the saddle will leave its effects on the most experienced horseman.

"Monsieur is surprised," said the old Frenchman, coming into the room with his violin in one hand—a rather crazy, poverty-stricken kind of violin—and the bow in the other. "It was this way. Monsieur Fenton was quite so fatigued that he fell sound asleep in the café and nothing could arouse him. Luckily my lodgings were close by and, with the help of a stout young fellow, who will return to-day for some compensation, which I had to promise, not having anything by me"—this apologetically—"we managed to get monsieur here and to bed. I trust that monsieur is feeling much better?"

Fenton was already out of bed and in the middle of his toilet. He dressed hurriedly, albeit stiffly.

"What news is there?" he asked gravely. "What of the King?"

An expression of sadness came into the fine eyes of the old exile.

"It is indeed the great catastrophe, monsieur," he said. "The King is dying. I have just come from the palace where the official bulletins are published. He has not recovered consciousness. The physicians hold out no hope."

Fenton's worst fears were realised. It was some minutes before he could recover sufficient composure to go on.

"Has the assassin been caught?" he asked.

Monsieur Dubois shook his head. Then lines of anger and determination showed around his eyes and mouth. He elevated one arm and shook the bow menacingly. "The arch assassin, he shall pay for this!" he exclaimed. "It is told everywhere on the streets that it was Miridoff who planned the murder of the King—the strong King who was needed to lead Ironia to victory. Ironia has a heavy score to settle with Miridoff."

"Miridoff is dead," said Fenton.

"How do you know?" demanded the musician eagerly. "There is nothing known of the Grand Duke's whereabouts. Serajoz is full of the mystery."

"He is dead beyond all doubt," declared the Canadian. "I killed him myself."

Followed a brief recital of some of the principal events in the mountains which had led up to the capture of the hunting lodge, and the release of the princess. Monsieur Dubois could hardly restrain himself. At the conclusion of the narrative he seized Fenton by both hands and poured out a volley of incoherent praise.

"My young friend has had a most great honour," he wound up by saying. "It has fallen to his lot to rescue the Queen of Ironia. What honours shall be heaped upon him!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Fenton, almost roughly.

"If Peter dies the throne will pass to the Princess Olga," explained the other. "She is the last of the line. Alexander is childless, and the princess is the only child of Peter. There is no one to dispute the throne with our beautiful Olga, who, it is said, is just as good as she is beautiful."

Fenton, who had suddenly sought a seat, did not say anything.

The musician rambled on:

"And a great heritage she will come into, this Queen Olga." The old Frenchman, fond as he was of the country from which he was an exile, had a very real regard for the welfare of the little land where he had lived so long. "When the war is over," his voice droned on, "Ironia will have added again the two provinces, Serania and Mulkovina. And I shall throw up my hat nearly as joyfully for that as I shall for the return into the victorious borders of La Belle France of Alsace-Lorraine." This last appeared to overcome him for a moment, and he paused before starting again.

"Ironia will then have a population of ten million, Monsieur Fenton. Think of that. She will become a power in Europe on a scale long looked forward to by her rulers. Then the young Queen will have a great country to reign over."

Fenton raised his head and clutched at a figurative straw. "But can a woman occupy the throne of Ironia?"

"But certainly. She will marry, of course. Indeed, even now they are saying on the street that a match will be made for our Queen with a prince of Serbia. It would be a fine stroke." The Frenchman mooned on while Fenton sat dumbfounded. This old man was calmly

and unwittingly puncturing the bubbles of happiness that had engrossed the Canadian's attention since the romantic episode of the hills. "It would cement once again the Balkan confederacy. Some of the glory of the past would be theirs, and more glory than the past ever knew."

"Supposing the princess were already married, though?" said Fenton slowly and in a strained tone.

"Eh?" The old Frenchman opened his eyes sharply. "A—what you call—morganatic marriage?"

"No," said the other impatiently. "Supposing that the princess, not expecting to be Queen of Ironia, had married someone quietly—not expecting to be Queen," he repeated, as if to urge to himself and the old man every possible means of exit from this *cul-de-sac* that, for the first time, he realised he had landed in. "What then?"

"It would make no difference." Monsieur Dubois shook his head decidedly. "It would be set aside, my young friend. Nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of matters of State."

Fenton was silent for a moment. Then he stood up and straightened his shoulders. He felt as if he must be alone at once. "Monsieur Dubois," he said, "you have spoken to me about the one aim you have—to get back to France. You have been very kind to me. Will you permit me to reciprocate ever so little and advance the necessary means?"

The old man shook his head and smiled. "They may not take me back in La Belle France. I am an old man. But here, young and old, all will get a chance. I shall stay, monsieur."

He too rose and squared his shoulders. His frame was a little bent, his hands trembled, but there was a look of profound determination and of profounder pride in his eyes as he shook back his tousled grey hair. "Maybe we shall meet at the front, Monsieur Fenton," he said.

They did. It was two months afterward in a field hospital along the frontier. A shell had shattered the musician's leg. He did not recognise Fenton, and babbled incoherently of France and freedom.

* * * * *

Leaving the lodgings of Monsieur Dubois, Fenton hurried to the palace. Varden, he felt sure, would be there.

The streets were strangely different from what he had known them when, barely a week before, he had arrived in Serajoz for the first time. The city seemed to be one gigantic military camp. Troops passed and repassed. The rumble of artillery was a familiar sound, and occasioned little specific interest. The crowds were smaller already. Thousands of men had enlisted. They had been talking about war for months. They were prepared.

Fenton found Varden at the palace. The latter was coming down the corridor which led from the personal suite of the King. Silently Varden gripped the hand of the Canadian, and for a moment did not speak. Then, "Peter is dead," he said in a low tone.

Fenton asked the question very quietly: "When?"

"He died a few minutes ago," returned the other. "Come."

Varden turned and led the way down the corridor through knots of officials, and through the antechamber where stood a few chosen friends and councillors, conversing in low tones, to a small detached office.

They sat down.

"Don," said Varden, "you've done wonderful work. I've heard all about it. The princess arrived this morning with Mademoiselle Petrova and that strange fellow Crane you picked up *en route*. He's a queer fish, but I like him. I haven't had a chance to see the princess, but the others are full of your exploits."

"The princess will be Queen now?" Fenton tried to keep his voice calm, but his mind was in a turmoil.

"Yes. I'm afraid this cooks your goose, old chap," said Varden easily. "She's bound to have some princeling or other for a husband now. In fact, a match is already spoken of."

Fenton nodded. Varden's remarks had convinced him on one score. Anna and Crane had said nothing about the ceremony over the tongs. Fenton stood up, restraint and determination mingling in his bearing. "It's quite impossible, I suppose, for me to see—Her Majesty"—his voice trembled slightly, then grew quite firm again. "Percy," he said, "you can fix me up with a post in the army? I want to be right up at the front."

Varden nodded without any particular enthusiasm.

"Wish I could go too," he said. "I'll get there, of course, as soon as the matter of the Queen's accession is settled. Until then I feel it my duty to stay here and watch things. And that means I'll miss the opening of the campaign."

"Is there any doubt," asked Fenton slowly, "as to the accession of Olga to the throne?"

"No," replied Varden. "But these are parlous times, Don. The new ruler is a woman, and there are some ambitious men at the head of the state at present. I have no doubt that Danilo Vanilis would not scruple to sweep her aside and seize the vacant throne himself if it were not for the fact that there are several others quite as ambitious and almost as powerful as himself who wouldn't stand by. Dynasties are unstable things in the Balkans, Don. Still, I am counting on the mutual jealousy of the leaders to provide the means for Olga to step quietly into her rights."

Fenton straightened up. In the face of this hint of a possible plot against the woman he loved, all mental uncertainty vanished.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked. "Nothing must stand between the princess and her rights. If money would be any inducement to quiet these trouble-makers, I'm willing to contribute all that I have."

"Quite unnecessary, Mr Quixote," said Varden. "There is a powerful faction to watch the interests of our little Olga. Never fear, she shall be Queen of Ironia."

CHAPTER XXVII

A LETTER OF FAREWELL

Fenton sat on a camp stool beneath the sloping sides of a canvas tent. Gusts of wind found their way inside, causing the candle that stood on a small table beside him to flicker uncertainly. Outside could be heard the even tramp of a sentry, and at rare intervals the thud of horses' hoofs. From a distance came the steady rumble that told of transport wagons on the move. Fenton wore the uniform of a cavalry officer.

Two days had passed since the death of King Peter, interminable days of torture and mental travail to the young Canadian. From the moment that Varden had spoken the fateful words, "Peter is dead," Fenton had in a vague way realised the duty that lay before him; although it was only after a long struggle with the promptings of his love that he had bowed to the inevitable. Olga was now Queen of Ironia. A great and shining future was before her. An empire lay within her grasp. What part could he, an alien and a commoner, expect to play in that future? True, she had married him, but when matters of state were hanging in the balance, a gipsy marriage over the tongs would be counted of little consequence. It could easily be set aside. In any case, who were there who knew of that romance of the hills? Anna Petrowa and Crane shared the secret with himself and Olga—no one else—and they would say no word.

He must go away. If it were deemed necessary to resort to the church for a proper dissolution of the bonds, he would render every assistance in his power. But this perhaps would not be necessary—for he was going to the front, a soldier of Her Serene Majesty, Queen Olga. That there was no other course open to him was quite clear. His presence would distress her, render the part she had to play more difficult for her. To save her the painful task of breaking off the relationship between them, he must go.

The two days had been busy ones, which was fortunate, for his mind had been kept occupied. He had been given a post in a cavalry brigade. With an almost savage absorption he had plunged into the stern duty of fitting himself for the work at the front. With grim but keen anticipation he had practised with the finely balanced sabre and the brace of revolvers that constituted his implements of warfare. No trooper rides in the charge with more reckless daring and insatiable determination than the man whose heart is filled with a tragedy of love. Fenton would undoubtedly prove a first-class fighting man.

That day at noon he had seen Phil Crane off with the artillery. The voluble Englishman had some knowledge of guns, and nothing would satisfy him but a post with the very first batteries that lumbered off for the front. Accordingly, being a most arrogant fellow, as has perhaps already been demonstrated, Crane had bluntly informed Anna of his intention of marrying her before leaving, and had then dragged her off to a church; the little dancer, truth to tell, being quite willing, under a pretence of reluctance. Fenton had witnessed the ceremony. He had again impressed upon them both the necessity for silence on the score of what had happened at the Hawk's Rest, and then had ridden back to the camp, which had been established outside Serajoz, with a careless: "I'll see you up at the front, Phil."

In the dim and guttering light of the candle, Fenton was writing. With many long and painful pauses he worked, until finally the letter lay before him completed. He read it over to himself again, considering each word and phrase:

"MY DEAREST,—I am addressing you as my heart dictates for the last time. For this I humbly crave your forgiveness. Perhaps, as this is the last message that can pass between us, you will condone my offence. I leave to-morrow for the front. We shall never see each other again.

"There is so much for you to forgive. My failure to save your father has weighed heavily upon me, and I realise how deeply you must feel the consequences. I tried my best—and, in the light of subsequent events, it has seemed to me that the hand of Fate intervened. It was God's will that you should rule over Ironia.

"A throne now separates us, and, my dearest wife (I cannot help so calling you), I realise fully what must be done. I bow to the inevitable. If the difficulties of your position in view of what transpired in the hills, have added to the measure of your sorrow, I want to give you complete assurance on the score of my acceptance of the part that has devolved upon me. If legal proceedings are necessary, I shall lend every assistance. But I do not think it will come to that. Heavy fighting is ahead of us, and I may be fortunate——

"I cannot find words to express the depth of my love for you. My darling! My bride! It is hard to give you up! But to have won your love, if only to lose it, is greater fortune than I deserve. The memory of your love will remain with me to the last. It provides me now in the depth of my despair with a wonderful solace. I have known greater happiness than ever before fell to the lot of man—and with that great thought stored in my mind I face the future—whatever it holds—with courage. I surrender you to a brilliant future, Olga, Queen of Ironia. May it be as happy as it will be illustrious.... I know that sometimes you will think of me.

"And so, my wife, good-bye.

"Henceforth I shall be a soldier in your army. Your Majesty will have none more loyal and respectful. If I die in your service—I can think of no greater end. If I live, I shall stand ready to come from any place in the wide world at your bidding. If it should come about that you ever need me, all that I have, my life, will be at your service."

* * * * *

The letter on its way, Fenton gave himself up to a hopeless train of reflection. He saw Olga again as on the first time that they had met, beautiful, stately, on the crowded floor of the ball-room. Again he saw her there among the palms as he hastily warned her of the evil that might befall her father. Once more she stood, framed in the doorway of Varden's library, the personification of offended dignity. The scene changed and he lived over the thrill of their first embrace. He pictured her as they had stood hand in hand, plighting their marriage vows over the tongs; and finally he visioned afresh her surprise when she had found him to be her husband—and he saw the wonderful tenderness that grew in her eyes.

He would never see her again!

His vigil was a long one. Early dawn found him, haggard of face and heavy of eye, staring moodily across to the eastern hills above which the rays of the rising sun heralded a new day—a day devoid of happiness and zest, the first of an endless succession of empty days. Fenton resented the new day, for it brought him no purpose, no hope.

An orderly came with a letter.

Fenton took it. He knew what it was, and his hand trembled. He had, of course, expected an answer; in fact, he had satisfied himself as to what she would almost certainly say. Her letter would be dignified, tender, regretful. It would voice the strength of her determination to devote her life to her people; perhaps it would reveal something of her love. And yet as he turned the note in his hands the hopes and longings that he had spent the night in putting aside trooped back and ran riot through his mind.

He opened it and read:

"Come to me at once.—OLGA."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE REUNION

The body of King Peter lay in state. All the previous day a continuous line of his mourning subjects had filed past the royal bier to gaze for the last time on the placid face of this King of an hour, who had given up his life in their service. Now the darkened room, hung with heavy curtains of sombre hue, through which the light of the early morning sun penetrated but dimly, seemed at first glance deserted.

As Fenton's eyes became accustomed to the gloom, however, he made out a slender figure in black standing on the raised dais, her head pillowed on her arms, which rested on the side of the bier.

The quiet figure stirred at the sound of his approaching footsteps. She raised her head, then straightened up and stepped down to meet him. Olga was very pale and sad of face, but a tender welcome showed in her eyes.

"You came quickly," she said in a low tone.

Fenton had expected that the change in their positions would be reflected in her attitude, so he could scarcely credit it when, coming forward, she placed both her hands in his and looked up into his face with the same tenderness and infinite trust that she had shown when they parted.

"Olga!" he exclaimed, then stopped, finding no words to express his emotions.

"I received your letter last night," she went on in the same low tone. "I had already made up my mind, but your letter was a wonderful revelation. My dear, my dear, I never thought—I had not dared to think you loved me so!"

Fenton had not for a moment allowed his gaze to wander from her face. He noted with solicitude how wan and pale she was. The intensity of her grief showed in every line, but beneath it all was the light of a great resolution that almost transcended her sorrow.

"Why did you send for me?" he asked. "I didn't intend to see you again. I didn't want to make it—the inevitable—hard for you."

She nodded and pressed his hand gratefully.

"I understood your brave purpose," she said. "It spoke from every line of your letter. I read it many, many times and blessed you for it. But what you proposed is not necessary now."

Fenton did not understand. He was frankly puzzled at everything—her words, her attitude, even her dress. From the first moment that his eyes had rested upon her he had been aware of some subtle change. Too closely absorbed in his love and his loss for matters of detail to register on his mind, he had in a general way realised that there was something about her that was strangely different.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I am not Queen of Ironia," she said quietly. "I have refused the crown."

There was a tense pause.

Fenton gazed at her a moment in wonderment. Then, as full realisation of what her statement meant flashed through his mind, he drew her hands to his lips with a gesture of passionate gratitude. The unexpected had happened, a miracle had come to pass. Olga would continue his wife!

"I gave my answer to the council an hour before your letter reached me," she said with quiet simplicity. "There was no question as to my course when I found that acceptance of the crown would have meant foregoing my vows to you. Fortunately my decision was rendered easy by the attitude of some of the members of the council, who felt that the strong hand of a man was needed at the helm at this time. Certain ones there are, high in rank in Ironia, who would not scruple to seize the throne themselves. My father's loyal adherents supported me strongly and urged that I should assert my right to the throne, but I gladly, oh so gladly, relinquished all claim. And so I am free—and your wife!"

Fenton had sunk to his knees before her.

"I can hardly understand yet," he said humbly. "You have given up a throne—for me."

"For love and duty," she replied. "I can be of more value to my country now than had I essayed to fill my father's place. With Danilo Vanilis at the head of a provisional government, Ironia will be sure of capable handling during the times of stress that are ahead. After the war—if personal ambitions can be kept in check—Ironia may become a republic."

"But—what can I do to compensate you for what you have given up," cried Fenton.

He read the answer in her eyes.

* * * * *

There was a long pause. The silent presence of the royal dead chastened the joy of their reunion.

"Olga," said Fenton finally, "duty calls me. In two hours my regiment leaves for the front. I must say good-bye."

"No, not good-bye," she answered, raising her arm. "I too going to serve my country. See—I go to the front with you!"

At last Fenton understood the change in her appearance that had puzzled him. She was dressed in a plain black uniform, and on her arm was the Red Cross.

THE END

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